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EDITORIAL: THE DEAN OF SCIENCE FICTION

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

This morning I was interviewed (by phone) on a radio talk show. I submit to it every once in a while since I don't travel, and in that way I get to talk to people I wouldn't otherwise reach.

I must tell you, however, that I don't enjoy it. The endless interruptions for advertisements and service announcements are in the highest degree annoying, and the repetitious articulacy of the interviewer is wearisome.

The interviewer this morning had to introduce me to his audience some fifteen times (once after each interruption) and always managed to mispronounce my last name in the same way, even though every caller who phoned pronounced my name clearly and correctly. He also, in each one of the fifteen introductions, identified me as "the dean of science fiction."

Which I'm not.

The word "dean" is the English version of the latin *decanus* used in the Roman army for a leader of ten men (from the Latin *decem* meaning "ten"). The term can be used in military organizations, in clerical organizations, or in scholastic organizations, always to mean some particular person in authority, though he needn't be set over ten men exactly.

That more-or-less literal meaning of the word does not come into play in the phrase "dean of science fiction," however. There it has an honorary meaning.

The honorary use of the term signifies a senior member of some group, and it began, I think, in connection with the diplomatic corps. At any capital, there are gathered numerous diplomatic representatives of various other nations; and one of them is bound to be the senior man or (these days) woman, and is then referred to as the dean of the diplomatic corps. Since the language of diplomacy (at least until recently–and perhaps still, for all I know) is French, the term sometimes used is *doyen*.

I don't know that the dean of the diplomatic corps had any special reward for being the dean. Perhaps there was some sort of social prestige to it, or precedence. Perhaps the dean of the diplomatic corps had the honor of leading the cotillion, or of getting to perform the first bow when the king entered.

In any case, by extension, every other group with pretensions to prestige or intellect began to speak of one of themselves as the dean.

The next question is: What does one mean by the "senior member?"

The obvious suggestion that the senior member be the oldest in years makes no sense to me. As a matter of courtesy, one must defer to age, but surely an old man just appointed to a diplomatic post for the first time cannot take precedence over a somewhat younger man who has held his place for twenty years. The senior member has to be the one who is senior in service.

So the dean of science fiction is a man who has been writing science fiction longer than anyone else in the field—regardless of his age (although of course one can't have been writing science fiction for a long time without having grayed a little).

I must admit that, at first blush, I might be considered a candidate for the post, since my first science fiction story appeared in the March 1939 *Amazing,* over forty years ago.

Believe it or not, however, there are some members of my profession who are long-lived scoundrels and persistent rascals and who manage to be senior to myself both in age and in point of service.

Naturally, though, it should not be quite enough to be senior in both age and service and nothing more. We should make it difficult to qualify for the post of dean since we want to make sure that whoever holds it is a credit to the profession and is sufficiently glorious to allow us all to bask in his radiance.

Someone like my good friend Dr. John D. Clark, for instance, should not qualify. He published two very good stories in *Astounding* in 1937 and then, for one reason or another, never published another story in all the time since. John is a sterling fellow, but we can't make him the dean, We need someone who has not only been published a long time ago, but has continued to be published over a long period, rather frequently, and who has been continually identified with the field.

Then again, we can't have someone as dean who has published a considerable number of stories over a considerable period of time, but who has never really been recognized as a leading figure in the field.

That makes things a little rough, to be sure, because who is going to draw the invidious distinction between "a leading figure" and "not a leading figure." Certainly not I. And yet I think we can have a feeling that some writers have won awards and have written stories and books that have been continually popular.

In that case, weighing length of service, quality of service, and continuity of service, who would I suggest as the dean of science fiction? Easy. I am not only ready to name the dean, I am ready to name three other writers, in order, as runners-up. Here they are:

1) *Jack Williamson* is, to my way of thinking, the dean of science fiction at present. His first published story was "The Metal Man" in the December 1928 *Amazing,* more than ten years before my first story was published. He has already celebrated his Golden Anniversary as a writer and is currently the President of the Science Fiction Writers of America. He was the second person chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America as Grand Master of Science Fiction for the lifetime body of his work. Can there possibly be any argument about this, then? (Yes, of course, there can be. As in the case of all my editorials, readers are invited to agree or disagree.)

2) *Clifford D. Simak* had his first published story, "The World of the Red Sun," in the December 1931 *Wonder,* more than seven years before my first. He is still actively writing and his most recent book is *Mastodonia.* He was the third person chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America as Grand Master.

3) *L. Sprague de Camp* had his first published story, "The Isolinguals," in the September 1937 *Astounding,* a year and a half before my first. He is still working away busily, and some of his stories have appeared recently in this magazine and received considerable reader acclaim. He was the fourth person chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America as Grand Master.

4) *Lester del Rey* had his first published story, "The Faithful," in the April 1938 *Astounding,* nearly a year before my first. He is now (along with his wife, Judy-Lynn) the guiding spirit behind Del Rey Books, one of the important outlets for paperback science fiction and fantasy. He is the youngest of the four, having been born in 1915, and he is the only one of them who is still on the sunny side of seventy.

The one person who is not on the list and whose absence might startle people is Robert A. Heinlein.

If any science fiction writer may be considered to be the *best* science fiction writer by general consensus, it would have to be Heinlein. Every time a vote is taken of fans, readers, or teachers,

the same "big three" writers show up as most popular; and in first place is *always* Heinlein. As a matter of fact, this was recognized when he was the *first* person chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America as Grand Master.

So why isn't *he* the dean of science fiction? Well, the only reason I didn't select him is that matter of length of service. Heinlein's first story was "Life-Line," which appeared in the August 1939 *Astounding*. In that respect he is behind even me by almost half a year.

Which brings up one last point–

I don't know how the Science Fiction Writers of America choose their Grand Masters. It certainly isn't by vote, since I've never been asked to vote. I presume that someone, perhaps the officers, select the Grand Masters according to their royal whim.

So far they have made absolutely magnificent choices and I congratulate them. Yet I wonder if it would be considered decent to make a suggestion as to the next Grand Master. In view of the points I've made in this editorial, it seems to me that the fifth Grand Master should be Lester del Rey. What do you think?

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ON BOOKS
by Baird Searles

The Road to Corlay by Richard Cowper, Pocket Books (paper), $1.95
The Dragon Lord by David Drake, Berkley/Putnam, $10.95
The Web Between the Worlds by Charles Sheffield, Ace Books (paper), $4.95
Mistress Masham's Repose by T.H. White, Berkley (paper), $2.25
The Wizard of Oz, The Land of Oz, Ozma of Oz, Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz, The Road to Oz, The Emerald City of Oz, The Patchwork Girl of Oz by L. Frank Baum, Del Rey Books (paper), $1.95 each

I must confess that I had it in for Richard Cowper's popular short story, "Piper At the Gates of Dawn," because of its title. Reading the chapter of that title in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* was one of the earliest emotionally moving experiences of my life; and it is sacred to me, as it seems to be to many people.

But never judge a book by its cover (especially considering the pictures and blurbs on today's paperbacks), or a story by its title. Cowper has added to it a sequel called "The Road to Corlay," and the two have been published as a novel under the latter title (thank God); it is an interesting work.

The Road to Corlay belongs to a particular subgroup of science fiction, humanistically oriented and usually set in a post-global-catastrophe future. Offhand I can think of Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow,* Wyndham's *Re-Birth,* Pangborn's *Davy;* even Weinbaum's *The Black Flame* is similar, perhaps being the first of the lot. *The Road to Corlay* reminds me most strongly of *Davy,* but it's been a while since I read that edifying novel, and I may be being unfair to both authors.

The Cowper novel is set at the beginning of the fourth millennium A.D.; a thousand years before, the Earth had been subjected to an inundation caused by the melting of the ice caps, in turn triggered by atmospheric changes brought on by pollution. The locale is Britain, now an archipelago of small islands (Somerset is now Somersea), and the culture is pretechnologically agricultural. The Church is strong.

In part 1 (which will remain nameless), we meet 13-year-old Tom, a piper of great and perhaps mystical talent. He acquired his ability

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from a "wizard" who had cared for and educated him until his death; from him Tom has also gotten his pipe, an instrument of power which may or may not be technologically produced. In effect, in this section we see the founding of a new religion by and about Tom; this is a rare area of speculation for SF—I can think of few if any works that deal with real new forms of worship (as opposed to fake ones such as in Heinlein's *Sixth Column* aka *The Day After Tomorrow*).

The second and longer section takes place some eighteen years after the first and has to do with what has become of the new religion. At first tacitly condoned by the established Church, it has recently been declared heresy and gone figuratively underground, not easy since there are now many followers. The main action is concerned with the attempts of the major characters to get a valuable document of the new religion and Tom's pipes to a safe place, namely Corlay on the island of Brittany.

A curious subplot has to do with a time period just after our present, when the rains that are to form the inundation are just starting. A research scientist, experimenting with a drug that induces out-of-body experiences, somehow meshes mentally with the leading character of the future plot.

Cowper's writing is smooth and convincing; and what could have been a hackneyed, overdone setting seems fresh in his hands. I would guess that there will be a sequel a-coming, since there are various untied loose ends in this volume. (What are Tom's pipes, really? Of what importance is the 20th century subplot to the events in the 31st century?) I look forward to it.

I am something of a collector of the variations on the legends of the Trojan War, from Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra* to a version set in the Old West entitled *The Stars in their Courses*; and a book I find handy is *The Legends of Troy,* which is about those many variations. Someone better start thinking about doing such a book for the legion of variations on the Arthurian cycle, since they're coming thick and fast. This is probably all T.H. White's fault, since a generation of romantic fantasists has grown up on his *The Once and Future King* (an unfortunate rewrite, I maintain, of the three wonderful novels that were the original version). Lord knows, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* didn't do that much for us when we were forcefed it in the 8th grade.

Luckily, the Arthur thing has been flexible enough to stand all these spin-offs, and the latest one even now has a certain freshness

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in the harsh, strife-torn land which had once been held together by its mystical power. One of these few, a wizard, bestows his knowledge on the youth Orin, and urges him to undertake a quest to find the Song of the Kingdom and release it from its prison in the distant mountains. Orin is joined by two others also blessed with the gift of music. Drawn together by the forces of their melodies, propelled past obstacles by the vision of a better world, the three at last come to stand before Star Peak...and a gentle fantasy of magic and comradeship reaches its magnificent climax.

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to it. David Drake's *The Dragon Lord* is set quite realistically (like Rosemary Sutcliffe's fine non-fantasy historical, *The Sword at Sunset*) in a brutal and barbarous Britain where the war chief Arthur tries to maintain some order and coherence after the might of Rome has bit the dust.

The Arthur of *The Dragon Lord* is not all that nice a character, power hungry and slightly warped from the withered leg that has crippled him since birth. Merlin is downright slimy, with a beard "dirty, sparse, and ridiculous," and Lancelot is a ruthless martinet. If these are the good guys, one shudders at what the villains of the cycle would have been like if the author had chosen to use them as characters.

The real heros of the book are the Irishman, Mael, and the Dane, Starkad, soldiers of fortune and new recruits to Arthur's companions. They're a sort of Fafhrd-and-the-Gray-Mouser act without the jokes; in fact, the novel could be a Leiber adventure except that it's in an entirely different key, vicious and violent instead of Leiber light.

Mael and Starkad are involved in two quests: the first to find the skull of a water monster, necessary for Merlin to create the raging dragon that Arthur wants as a weapon against the Saxons, and the second to steal the spear and shield of Achilles from the Saxon who holds them. On the way lies involvement with live water monsters, a walking cannibalistic corpse, and the beautiful witch Veleda; there is a final confrontation with the gigantic dragon that Merlin has created and is not able to control.

The unpleasant details of this magic, barbarian Britain are made very real—it is not a book for the squeamish or the romantic sophomore who wants to be Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat. But the brutality here brings with it a certain power in the story and its telling; it is not there for its own exploitative sake. This and the author's creative imagination make up for the rather too simple, episodic shape of the novel.

When we're in a cycle such as the Arthurian one mentioned above, with a spate of novels appearing based on one legend, it wouldn't be all that surprising if two happened to be very similar. It *is* surprising, though, when two science fiction novels come out that both revolve around one single piece of technological speculation. This has happened with Charles Sheffield's *The Web Between the Worlds*, which concerns the building of just such a "skyhook" as Arthur C. Clarke centered on in his latest novel, *The Fountains of Paradise*.

Having recently been involved in nursing a book through from conception to publication, I know how long the production of a book can take, from publisher acceptance to bookstore distribution. So with the Sheffield/Clarke books, there can be no question of anything but purest coincidence in their similarity. And given the initial idea, it's not unlikely that the books would also take rather the same approach, using as protagonist the bridge-building engineer who is responsible for the construction of this bridge to space. It is just Mr. Sheffield's misfortune that he will have to cope with the inevitable comparisons.

So let's don't, because *Web* is an absorbing and well-done book in its own right. A "skyhook," for those who don't know, is literally a bridge to space, anchored to Earth on one end and to a synchronous satellite on the other, and extending, in this case, a quarter of the way to the Moon.

Obviously, the building of such a monumental object is a story in itself; but Sheffield has also given us a melodramatic subplot which is part thriller, part murder mystery. The richest man in the Solar System, who conceived and backed the Beanstalk (as the skyhook is here called), the mysterious remains of tiny humanoid beings called "Goblins," and an intelligent and malevolent giant squid named Caliban are all pieces of the puzzle, and the solution did indeed give me some mild surprises.

Speaking of T.H. White, one of the most delightful fantasies ever has finally been reprinted—White's wonderful *Mistress Masham's Repose*. At a superficial glance, one might think it a children's book, since the heroine Maria is ten years old and the novel has a certain whimsical quality. One would be just as mistaken as one would be in considering *The Sword in the Stone* a juvenile.

Maria is an orphan, under the care of a wicked Vicar and an even wickeder governess. She lives in an enormous estate called Malplaquet, "about four times longer than Buckingham Palace, but falling down . . . it was surrounded by Vistas, Obelisks, Pyramids, Columns, Temples, Rotundas, and Palladian Bridges." Anyone who has been to England's Blenheim Palace, home of the Churchills, will know where White got his inspiration for Malplaquet.

Now Maria discovers on the endless grounds of Malplaquet—on Mistress Masham's Repose, an island in a lake called The Quincunx, to be exact—a colony of Lilliputians, descended from a group that Gulliver had brought back, unrecorded by Swift. Maria becomes their friend and protectress; but horrors!, her wicked guardians find

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out about the little people and want to capture them and show them off to the public for a lot of money.

The rest of the plot is devoted to how Maria prevents this, with the aid of the Cook ("Rule Britannia is my motter"); her old dog, Captain ("It is uncanny how canine a human can be if you are kind to them"); and the most absent-minded professor of all time. It's absolutely hilarious, but underneath White is making the kind of moral truths and psychological insights that he did in the Arthurian series. It takes a while, for instance, for Maria to realize that the tiny Lilliputians are not toys created for her benefit, but adult and sensible beings.

This one is indeed a classic. May it long stay in print.

Now for some real juveniles, whose republication, nevertheless, I consider a major publishing event. Almost every mature fantasy and science fiction reader I meet has started out on the Oz books. Over the years, Oz has meant as much to an older generation as Middle Earth and Narnia has meant to a younger one.

L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* appeared, significantly enough, in 1900, just a short time before Edgar Rice Burroughs began chronicling Barsoom. The two have much in common—both created worlds with infinite fantastical people, places, and things, waiting to be discovered by heroes and heroines from our own mundane setting. The series went eventually to over 30 books, continued by several authors after Baum's death. In the '50s, a shriek of anguish went up from Oz-lovers when some American library association or other decided, for various inane reasons, that the Oz books should not be carried by American libraries.

Whether for this or other reasons, they have been hard to get for the past score of years. Only the first few of those Oz books written by Baum have been erratically available in trade paperback editions. That whole Middle Earth/Narnia generation has been deprived of them, not to mention nostalgically-minded adults; the original hardcover Oz books are now high-priced collectors' items.

And now, praise be, we have the first seven Oz books in mass-market paperbacks, with their lovely illustrations intact, including the printed-in bookplates. (I only recently realized that my own taste for art nouveau came from John R. Neill's illutrations; he illustrated all the Oz books after the first—and wrote several—until his death.) The seven are:

The Wizard of Oz, whose plot is too well known to go into; *The Land of Oz,* in which an army of women has conquered the Scare-

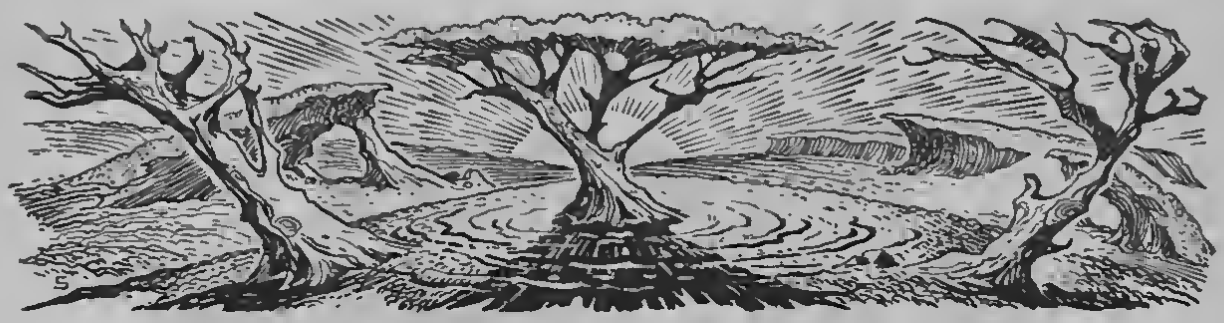
crow, and the boy Tip finds the real ruler of Oz in a most curious way; *Ozma of Oz,* in which Dorothy returns to Oz and helps Ozma conquer the wicked King of the Gnomes; *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz,* where those two old friends meet and travel in strange underground kingdoms (the most bizarre and peculiar book of the series, in my view); *The Road to Oz,* in which Dorothy goes from Kansas to Ozma's birthday party in a very roundabout way indeed, and we meet Polychrome, the Rainbow's daughter; *The Emerald City of Oz,* in which Dorothy comes to Oz for good, tours the country, and has another encounter with the Gnome King; and *The Patchwork Girl of Oz,* in which that animated ragbag, Scraps, comes to life and she and the Munchkin boy Ojo go on a quest.

We are promised the next seven books in the series in this format soon, and if we are *very* good and buy lots of Oz books for our nieces and nephews, we may even see the really hard-to-get ones, those written by Ruth Plumly Thompson and others after Baum's death, back in print.

One thing the practical-minded reader who hasn't been to Oz since childhood might ask is "Do they hold up?" All I can say is that for some strange psychological reason I went on an Oz binge a year ago, reading the 28 volumes I have left in my collection, sometimes 2 and 3 at a sitting, and was happy as a clam. And I found the Thompson books in some ways better than the Baums, lighter, funnier, and with less of the early 20th century American prejudices.

What else can I say, except—

Oz is!



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NovaCon, (517) 783-7673. Albany NY, 2-4 Nov. Wilson Arthur (Bhob) Tucker and Bob (Bosh) Shaw. "The first British con in the US." Free to holders of UK or Eire passports & pros.

InterVention, (801) 355-8076. Salt Lake City UT, 2-4 Nov. Robert Silverberg, Orson Scott Card, Don C. Thompson, Ed Bryant. The con explosion in the Intermountain West continues.

OryCon, (503) 761-8768. Portland OR, 9-11 Nov. John Varley, Richard E. Geis, Ursula K. LeGuin, Jesse Peel, Mildred Downey (Bubbles) Broxon. Impressive line-up of guests here.

PhilCon, c/o Randi Millstein, 10104 Clark St., Philadelphia PA 19116. King of Prussia (near Philadelphia) PA, 9-11 Nov. Joan Vinge and Karl Kofoed. The oldest SF con.

ICon, (319) 895-8928. Iowa City IA, 9-11 Nov. Gene Wolfe, James Van Allen (of Belt fame).

LosCon, (213) 361-7827. Los Angeles CA, 9-11 Nov. A. E. (Slan, Weapon Shops) van Vogt.

TusCon, Box 40934, Tucson AZ 85717. 16-18 Nov. Ed Bryant, S. M. Charnas, Bob Vardeman.

Future Party, c/o Bunt, 606 Alpine Village, E. Greenbush NY 12601. (518) 477-4320. Albany NY, 22-25 Nov. Asimov, Clement, Lichtenberg, Sturgeon. Fashion/design and film contests.

NutriaCon, c/o Longo, 221 Wadsworth, New Orleans LA 70122. (504) 283-4833. Nov. 30-Dec. 2, 1979. Karl Edward Wagner, Bob Tucker, Geo. Alec Effinger. Round-the-clock party room.

ChattaCon, Box 21173, Chattanooga TN 37421. (615) 892-5127. 4-6 Jan., 1980. Hal Clement, Joan Vinge, W. A. (Bob) Tucker (who'll be "roasted"). "The first SF con of the 1980's."

HexaCon, c/o Newrock, Box 270-A, R. D. 2, Flemington NJ 08822. Lancaster, PA, 11-13 Jan.

FortCon, c/o Anti-Martian Society, Student Center Box 407, Colo. State U., Ft. Collins CO 80523. 8-10 Feb. Fred (Berserker) Saberhagen, Ed Bryant. The West strikes yet again.

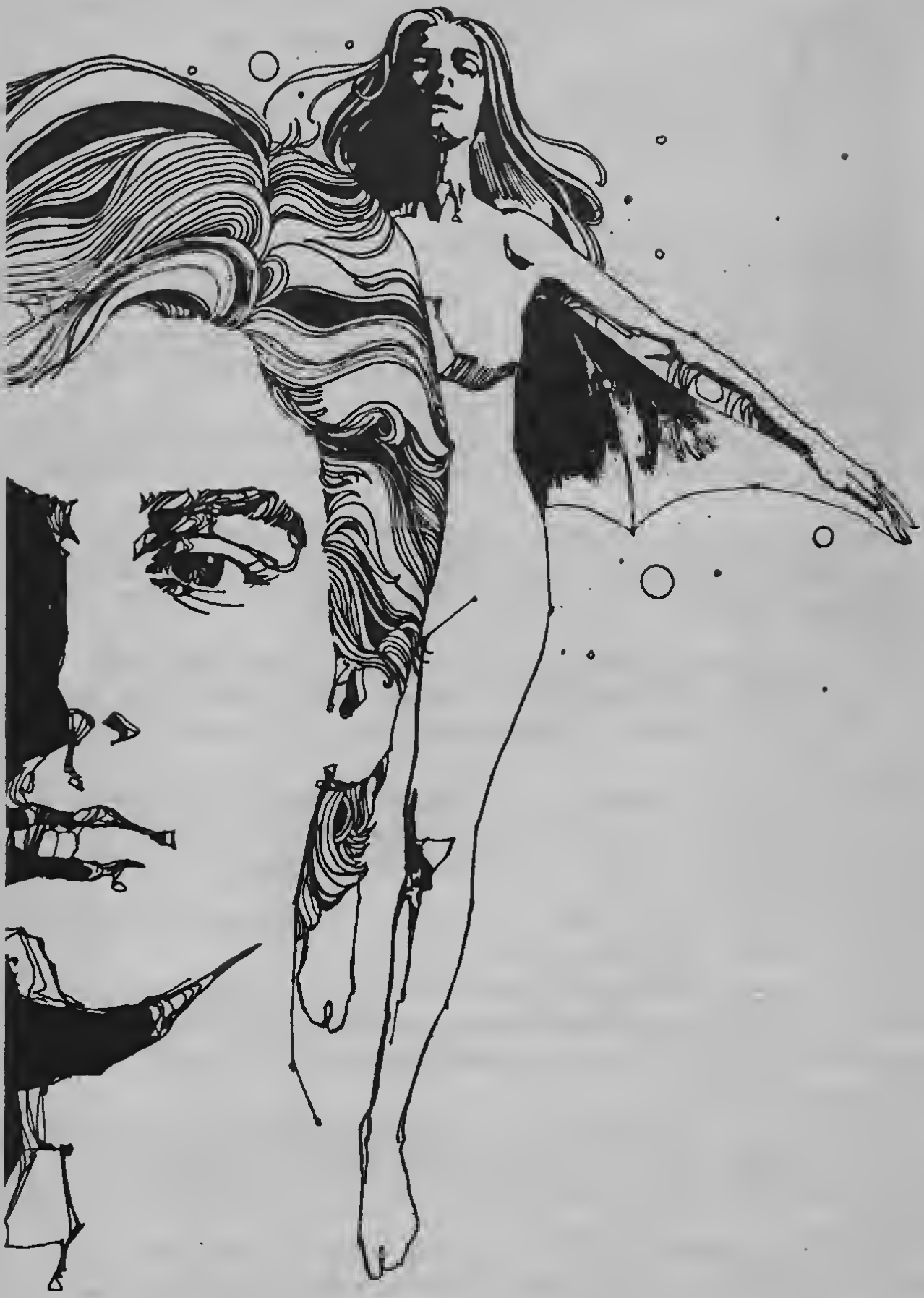
WesterCon, Box 2009, Van Nuys CA 91404. Los Angeles CA, 4-6 July. Roger (Amber) Zelazny, Bob Vardeman. The big traveling Western convention for 1980. Always a three-ring circus.

NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139. 29 Aug.-1 Sept., 1980. Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm & Bruce Pelz. The World SF Convention for 1980, back in Beantown after 9 years.

THE ETERNAL GENESIS

by Milton A. Rothman

art: Vincent Di Fate



Having retired from teaching physics last June, Dr. Rothman is now (he claims) trying to make enough from writing to pay for organ lessons, with the ambition of developing the third half of his brain so as to play fugues with his feet.

The alarm whined abruptly into Jon Secular's ears. He jerked his head around and stared with hard eyes and grim, compressed lips at the emergency readout. The landing had been going slick as oiled teflon, and suddenly there was this message blinking away at him in big red letters: ***GAMMA DETECTORS SATURATED AT 100 REM PER MINUTE.*** And 500 rem was lethal.

The shuttle had barely made contact with the outer fringes of the atmosphere. Mother ship Primus hung above at 20 thousand kilometers.

Secular's grey eyes turned for half a breath to the forward viewscreen and scanned the terrain 200 kilometers below. The planet looked blue and inviting; no sign of hostile energy transmitters was visible.

He hesitated for another half a breath and then spoke tautly into the microphone. "General alarm. Fasten seat belts all. I'm pulling us out of this atmosphere. Mason, compute us a course to return to Primus."

He punched a command into the control, then leaned back in his acceleration chair and pulled the restraining web across, in time to feel the surge of the rockets as they labored to pull the shuttle out of the descending spiral.

The radio squawked. "Hermann here on Primus. We see your course changing. What's wrong?"

"I don't know. From the symptoms we're under attack, but I don't see any attackers. Our detectors have crapped out under a huge flux of gamma radiation. Can your people determine where the gammas are coming from?"

Secular waited while hearing words muttering and mumbling in the background. Finally: "Hermann again. Our radiation people tell us the gammas are directly from your shuttle. There's no other source."

Secular's mouth hung open in blank disbelief. His hand pushed back the shock of greying hair that had tumbled over his eyes. "Are you telling me we suddenly became radioactive? I can't believe it.

Let me get Geza Janosz on the phone."

He called for Janosz; the computer searched the shuttle passenger compartment and in a moment the thin face within the frame of white hair became centered in the video screen. The figure was frail, but the long, bony hands could still play a lively tune on a computer keyboard.

"Why are we leaving this planet?" Janosz asked the moment Secular's face bloomed in his screen. His eyes were like black olives.

"We're returning to Primus. Because we're being blasted by an enormous dose of gamma rays. Another few minutes and it would have been fatal."

"Gammas? From where?" Janosz's eyes glared into Secular's face with an intensity that still caused a curling and a fading within the younger man.

"That's the strange part. Primus tells me that gammas are coming directly from our own shuttle. I had thought we were under attack. But there is no evidence of an outside source. How can we suddenly become radioactive?"

Janosz seemed to sink into his flight chair. His eyes became hooded and for a brief moment closed. When they opened they glared with black ferocity at Secular. "Ask Primus if we are still radiating. And ask them to determine the energy of the radiation."

Secular returned to the radio, patching it to the phone so that Janosz could hear the reply. "Hermann, what's happening to the radiation?"

Hermann's voice, baffled, uncertain, crackled across the vacuum from orbiting Primus. "It's gone down. Drastically. The farther out you climb the less radiation there is."

"Janosz wants to know its energy."

"Just a minute. I'll ask the technicians."

Again mutterings in the background, while Jon Secular scanned the readouts on the control panels, checking for normalcy. The forward screen showed star-spangled blackness with the spheroid of Primus in the upper right hand corner.

Hermann's voice returned on the ship-to-ship. "They tell me it's about half an MeV. Zero point five one one MeV, to be exact. Does that mean anything?"

"Janosz should know."

Secular turned to Janosz in the screen and stopped, shocked. The old man's mouth was turned down in cold, bitter disappointment. His shoulders heaved slowly, and his gnarled hands came up to cover the tears that welled up from the corners of his eyes.

Lost. It was all lost. Janosz's mourning deepened. He covered his face and rocked in his chair. A century of effort, 88 years of travel, a civilization, an entire heritage of humanity, all for naught. Memories sifted through his mind–a montage of scenes from that world irrevocably left behind: the development of his grandiose plan to escape from the collapsing universe; the decade-long struggle to build the Primus, their lifeboat into eternity. Hollowed out of a ten-kilometer asteroid, it offered at least a miniscule sample of humanity an opportunity to escape from universal collapse into blackness.

Outward they had traveled, at a constant acceleration of one normal gravity, picking up speed at a steady pace until at the end of three years' time they were within one percent of the speed of light. And still they continued to accelerate, year after year, while time and space altered their aspect in relation to the ship. For 22 ship years they drove outward, beyond the Galaxy, past all the remaining galaxies, leaving the universe behind while it passed through four billion years of collapse and black death.

Then, a new bang, a new birth, a new universe. All the while they slowed down, accelerated back toward the newly condensing galaxies and stars, and decelerated once more until able to approach a new, fresh planet. A total of 16 billion years had transpired in the universe, while the travelers had lived through 88 years of working, playing, making love, bearing children, growing old.

Then, just at the instant of triumph, just at the approach in the shuttle to the tenuous outward reaches of the planetary atmosphere, they were forced to recoil, to flee back to the haven of mother ship.

All lost. All wasted.

Jon Secular's voice pulled him out of blackness. "Janosz, what is it?"

"Don't you know?" Janosz's voice, shrunken and bitter, crept through the phone system, with barely the strength to fall on Secular's ear. "Half an MeV is the energy of annihilation radiation–the gamma rays created when electrons meet positrons. The dying cry of matter annihilating antimatter."

"Antimatter!"

"Don't you see what's happening? We lived past the death of our universe and the birth of a new one. But the new universe chose to become made of antimatter. We can never land on this planet. We can only float aimlessly through space, and in time our ship will gradually become annihilated as it reacts with the gas of interstellar space. Our great effort has been in vain. The life of our species is finished."

Silence wrapped itself like a cloak around Janosz as he sank back into his seat.

May Wheeler turned from the fading screen, her mouth twisted in dissatisfaction. "It's not a bad idea," she said, grudgingly, "but the customers want an upbeat ending. The characters have to get themselves out of their jam."

She stood up and stretched. The room was small, colorless, with only the projection screen on the wall, three chairs, and a table with the usual terminal module. Wheeler perched herself on the edge of the table. Her figure was a continuum of curves and bulges; but her face was becoming hard, the lines at the corners of her mouth and between the eyes beginning to subtract from her attractiveness.

The fact that she had to tilt her head way back to look at the object of her criticism in no way slowed her tongue.

"Furthermore," she continued, "you have this story laid some billions of years in the future, when the universe has turned around and is collapsing instead of expanding. But your characters are completely human, with ordinary American or European names. Hell, we have more changes than that in a few hundred years. Give a little more color, a little more of that famous imagination of yours."

Jim Kincaid blushed. He blushed easily, his skin rabbity pink, his white hair scrabbly. He gangled interminably, appeared to be all legs and knees and elbows. His eyes were as blue as a sky he had never seen and the lines of his mouth were beginning to take on a gentle firmness. He looked down sadly onto the top of May Wheeler's head.

"No tragedies, eh?"

"No tragedies. When you get to be Shakespeare you can write a tragedy. Right now you're trying to get your leg up in the entertainment world and the public likes nice endings, with all problems solved. And we're trying to get a studio going that will bring some money into Lagrange. So use your talents profitably. You do have talents. Don't throw them away."

Kincaid sighed. "Okay, I'll try again." His voice was that of a very ancient twenty-year-old.

He left the room through a door labeled LAGRANGE ENTERTAINMENT RESEARCH BUREAU and ambled his way to the nearest radial column, finding an elevator waiting. As the elevator rose to the central shaft of satellite Lagrange, he ignored the spectacular sight of the hollow cylinder swelling up around him while he climbed two kilometers to the zero-gee region. His chair swiveled to align him

with the total of the forces pulling on him. Because he was inside a rotating satellite, centrifugal force pulled him outward; because he was moving toward the center, coriolis force pulled him sideways. As it appeared from his vantage point the entire satellite tilted crazily about, but he ignored this behavior because this was the way things always had been since his day of birth.

The elevator slowed as it reached the central shaft and stopped just inside. Once inside that hollow cylinder stretching the entire length of the satellite, he braced himself for the lateral acceleration that whipped his small car around to match its speed with that of the small opening in the inner shaft spinning massively over his head, making one revolution every 90 seconds.

With an ingenious maneuver, the elevator capsule made a quick rotation and fastened its mouth to the opening on the face of the inner shaft. The door dilated and he floated out. Totally weightless now, he found himself within the motionless axis about which the entire satellite habitat revolved.

Swiftly he swam down one straight hallway and around another, a circumferential one, pulling himself along with hand grips on the wall. At a small door labeled CYBERNET STUDIO ONE he fingered the lock until it opened.

Inside was a cramped control room, a console, a pair of chairs, a closet, a bathroom, and a door leading to the studio. Slowly Jim Kincaid removed his clothing. His naked body, pink as a boiled shrimp, gangled more than ever. His height brought his head two inches from the ceiling, but little flesh clothed the bones.

He sat on one chair and breathed deeply, going into himself. Soon he felt calm return to his mind, and he stood up to enter the studio. Without his clothing there could be seen at the rear of his skull, starting at the base of his neck and running up into his thick mat of hair, an unobtrusive plastic covering, the shell of his cybernet transducer.

The studio was a horizontal cylinder, with enough diameter to stand up in, enough length to lie down in. He pulled the heavy door shut behind him, fingered a switch on the small control panel just inside the door, and laid himself down on the air.

Without gravity, he floated. Silent, invisible currents of air held him centered. He reached out with his mind to the controls and dimmed the lights. Through microsurgery, crucial filaments of his spinal cord had been connected physically to the transducer circuit. There, the infinitesimal electrical impulses were amplified and relayed to radio pickups lining the walls of the chamber. In this way

he could communicate with the computer in the next room.

In darkness, in silence, with no touch on the surface of his body, his thoughts were free of interference. Images began to grow. A microcosmic universe burst into creation within the cells of Kincaid's brain; the electrical pulses corresponding to the images flowed through the wires, through the transducer, into the computer. There they were recorded, later to be reconstituted as visual images.

Bessar's body, steel grey and flexible as a whip, stood motionless at the crystalline console of his ship, antennae rigid. The white clouds of the receding planet swam hazily within the vision sphere. Ultrasonic signals from within Bessar's dorsal segment resonated with the tuned luminescent crystals of the control console as he planned the return trip to Xextra, their home ship. The crystals glowed blue, green, red, and infrared–vivid sparks of color feeding back signals to Bessar's alert senses.

Old Shawmssen reclined dejectedly on his flight nest. Striations of silver surrounded his optic stalks; his complex claws were scarred with the ravages of great age.

"We've failed." His voice remained musical and resonant, but was underlaid with a quaver. "It has all been wasted effort, futile effort..We shall all die on Xextra."

"Perhaps not." Bessar turned to Shawmssen; his body twisted lithely as a thought suddenly evolved. "Perhaps only this galaxy or cluster consists of antimatter. It is logical that the universe should contain just as much real matter as antimatter. We have simply come back into the wrong region. We must now go on and search for a galaxy made of our kind of matter. There is no need to give up."

"For you, perhaps, but not for me." Shawmssen curled into a tight spiral, overpowered with black despair. "I am too old to sustain another intergalactic voyage. Too old to hop from one sector to another."

He fixed his gaze into the blank interior of the vision sphere, where the mottled grey ball of Xextra began to enlarge. "Perhaps our people will yet find a home. But for me it is the end."

Looking at the sour line of May Wheeler's mouth, Jim Kincaid knew he still hadn't scored. He sat limply and waited for the barrage.

"Jim," she began, "there are some good things about this new try. Your imagery is very fine. The detail work, the color. The aliens are very imaginative. That's why you were chosen to become a cy-

bernet in the first place. You always had superior powers of visualization. But your concept of a story is pitiful. Your ending is too vague. Nobody will know how it's going to work out. You can't end on a maybe. You must have a positive ending. You must have the successful resolution of the problem. And your whole tone is too sad, too pessimistic."

He shrugged. "What do you expect? I've lived on this stinking wheel for all of my 20 years. I've never done anything, never gone anywhere. How do you expect me to make up a story? Why don't you hire a writer?"

Irritation edged Wheeler's voice. "Good writers are hard to come by. There's nobody on Lagrange who can write anything but computer programs and tech memos."

"Then bring one up from Earth."

"Believe me, we're working on it. But try to get an expense like that through Executive Committee! They'd rather spend the money on a ton of computer components."

"Hell, don't they know we're trying to make money for them?"

"I tell them and I tell them. But they're a bunch of hard-heads. You can't convince them that cybernet discs will be a profitable export item until you produce a working model. And that's what we're trying to do. They let us have a pilot project to show feasibility. Now we have to show them."

"So I'm your goose. And if I can't lay the golden eggs?"

"Don't worry. You will. It just takes some learning. You have the picture-making genius. With your head we don't need sets or scenery. Just a computer to translate your thoughts. You just have to learn the mechanics of script writing."

He laughed. "Yeah. That's all."

"Look," she urged. "Take the rest of the day off. Go get some rest. Enjoy yourself."

"Okay," he said. But his heart was not in it.

As Kincaid left, Wheeler turned to the closet with a sigh and poured herself a drink, returning with it to a soft chair where she sat and schemed. It was not easy riding herd over a young genius with a mind yet unformed, a soul full of *weltschmertz*. But her vision of a new form of entertainment, a new art form perhaps, drove her furiously from one day to the next.

Jim Kincaid stretched his wings and flew. Light air whistled softly past his ears. Below, above, all around the vast cylinder of the satellite swooped and stretched away to a vanishing point. Behind

him, the end wall of the satellite, sculpted to resemble a mountainside, fanned out from the central shaft mooring.

Just below the shaft, the flyers soared. In this region of zero gravity, gliding over air currents with filmy webs strapped to the arms made a sport exhilarating and popular. Since childhood Kincaid had come up here to the axis to float, to glide, to escape the heaviness of the periphery. Entranced, he flew with eyes opened just enough to avoid the other flyers, with just enough attention to keep clear of the hazard limit. Flying below that limit carried with it a risk–not of falling to the periphery, for in free flight there was neither gravity nor centrifugal force–but a risk of being swept up by the air rotating with the satellite and being carried to a rough landing. Some did it purposely for the thrill.

Not Jim Kincaid. He liked to float and dream and build fantasies in his mind. From his earliest testing, the psychologists had been impressed by his ability to form mental images. It was for this reason he had been chosen to participate in the cybernet experiment. He had been one of the first subjects to have a transducer spliced to his spinal cord. The original aim of the experiment was to train a man to be his own computer terminal, to communicate directly with the machine, with no keyboard, microphone, or video screen in the way.

Afterwards, it had been realized that Kincaid could make pictures this way, and the pictures could be set end to end to make a story, recorded on computer discs. The concept of cybernet discs was born.

Kincaid was grateful for the chance to do something creative. Growing up in Lagrange had been like growing up in a small town of a few thousand inhabitants. School had been strict, amusements few, and the horizon curved over and met itself. There was no place else to go, except for the sister satellite, revolving reversely a few kilometers away, a mirror image of home.

He'd made that trip a few times, shuttling back and forth to the sister satellite, watching the sun dazzling in one direction, and blue-white earth beckoning in the other. Earth, with its thousands of kilometers of surface to explore, its endless varieties of places, reached out and drew him like a magnet. But the cost of going down to Earth and returning to Lagrange was more than he could contemplate. Only those on official business managed it.

Soar. Swoop. Turn. Some did it in pairs, performing arabesques in the air. Candy Cooper sailed by, holding hands with that lunkhead Jeff Stone. Anger spurted into Jim Kincaid's skull. He gasped at the sudden throbbing. Candy saw him and waved casually, as though there had been nothing between them–as though last week

had meant nothing at all to her. Had he been idiotic to take it seriously, to take it for more than a game?

The anger diffused inward, turned rancid, turned against himself. Any girl who found attraction in such a skinny, pink, frizzle-headed misfit had to have something wrong with her, he decided. He was better off alone.

Soaring was suddenly without charm. He resisted the urge to fold his wings and let the winds spread him flat like a smear of grease on the inner surface of the satellite. Slowly, he pulled himself back to the takeoff ledge.

There, lifting in a graceful flight, was Tina Cummings. Tina of the black braids and brown eyes. Tina, whom he had adored silently and from a distance, in school. Now her beauty was greater than ever and he knew she would never look at him.

For an instant a vivid and colorful picture bloomed in his mind. His face flared a bright red before he realized she had no way of knowing what he was thinking. Still, the image had been strong enough to cause him clinical excitement, and as he hurried down the path to periphery he wondered what old May Wheeler would think about a line of porno fantasies.

They floated in the twilight, nude bodies coming together with wings fluttering faintly. Her hands moved over his skin, arousing sensations that caused the clouds to mushroom over them.

He found his body beaded with perspiration in the dark.

Migod, I hadn't intended to do that!

Hastily, he had the computer kill the file just created. Still, he thought, perhaps he should keep the idea on the back burner. His sexual fantasies were strong and clear, and if Lagrange could make a profit as the porno capital of the solar system, well, then . . . But what would the Executive Committee say?

With a sigh he relaxed once more in the darkened cylinder of the studio and tried to get back to the script he had been pursuing.

Solat Kun scanned the spectra of the distant stars and his fringes flared a bright red.

"They're blue! They're shifting blue!"

Argor Vail retained a cool green iridescence on the hair-like fringes that circled his optic stalks. "They've always shifted blue. Ever since the universe started to collapse."

Solat Kun twisted irritably. "But we've gone beyond the collapse,

beyond the new rebirth. The universe should be expanding once more. But the shift remains blue. The universe still collapses! Argor Vail, call a council meeting."

The Phardor Council quickly assembled in the central chamber of Home. Solat Kun stood on the podium, reported his observations, and confessed his puzzlement. "Somewhere there has been a miscalculation. What could it be?"

"If I may make a suggestion," the pale, cracked voice of Nian Shon rasped across the room. The ancient sage of the voyagers remained couched, his shriveled members drawn up beneath him. "Find a viable planet. Make a close surveillance of its surface. Take video records of activities on that surface for several cycles. Then bring them here and let us see what is happening. But do not under any circumstances touch the surface of the planet or its atmosphere."

Solat Kun's fringes wriggled in appreciation. "A fine suggestion. Let it be done."

It took but one cycle for the evidence to be clear. Solat Kun silently showed the video to the Phardor Council. There was nothing to be said. The distant camera caught the inviting planetary surface with a clarity modified only by occasional atmospheric distortions.

Sun sparkled on the ocean as waves leaped up from the beach and rolled out to the sea. A bird dove into the blue water with a fish in its beak and swooped off empty-billed. The scene shifted to a river, cutting its way through a canyon. At a small waterfall the water clearly leaped from the lower pool up the cliff to the narrow stream far above. A large animal appeared, waddling in a strange manner along the riverbed until it came to the bloody carcass of a smaller creature. It busied itself with the skeleton, taking flesh from its mouth and molding it around the bones until the smaller animal, complete, leaped to its feet and began a brief struggle with the larger carnivore.

In fascination the Council watched the smaller creature back away from the fight, unmarked.

Nian Shon, the old, whispered faintly. The others leaned forward to hear. "The shift is blue, the water falls up, the waves unbreak and then flow outward. My friends, do you see what has happened? In the universe to which we have returned, time runs in the direction opposite to our own. Therefore instead of the stars expanding away from a new birth, they fall once more into another death. With our reversed time line we can never land on a planet, for to us it would seem like a world of antimatter."

Solat Kun's body arched in disappointment. "Then the trip has been wasted. Our universe has ended in futility."

Nian Shon stirred. An eye gleamed brightly. "Our universe has ended, but another one is out there. It simply exists without us."

"You don't even have to look at it," Jim Kincaid said to May Wheeler. "I know it's no good."

"What the hell's the matter?" Wheeler wanted to know. "You go into the studio knowing what's wrong. You know where you want the story to go. Why do you keep getting derailed onto this god-damned fatalistic track?"

"I don't know. Once I get in there and start floating the story takes off by itself. I lose control over it."

"I think it's time you started seeing the Shrink." Wheeler paced the length of her small office, turned, and leaned against the wall with her arms folded. "You need to get your mind under control. Make up your mind who's boss."

"Oh hell, May, I'm not gonna sit there talking to that stupid machine. I've had enough of that. I know all the answers it has. And it's not programmed for this problem. Getting into that cylinder and floating there–I fall into a trance and it's like I really live the story. It just happens."

Wheeler peered at Kincaid from behind slitted eyes. "You need more positive feedback from the computer, that's what. So far we're just using it for short-term processing–to help you hold images steady. But suppose we put into the program the outline of the plot. Enough to keep you headed in the right direction."

"Umm. Could be. At each crucial point it would feed me a hint about what's to happen next, and I fill in the picture. Can you program it?"

"Let me get Jack. He'll do it."

"But you still need a story."

"And that's still your job. You're the creative one, and you'll do it if I have to beat you."

Kincaid flushed. Behind his light tone hid a resentment. "Beat me till I bleed and then beat me for bleeding. But suppose I can't do it?"

She shrugged. "You can always go back to being a computer terminal. You want to be a star, you learn to create. If you don't want to do what has to be done, then just stick to your routine job. And some day you'll see the world go by and wonder how you got left behind."

"You act as though anybody can be creative just by turning on a switch."

Her broad face flickered. Mémories of her own struggles broke to the surface. "Not everybody. But more than you realize. I don't have the same kind of talent that you have. I get people to do things. I'm a change agent. I put my money on you–but if you don't come through it'll be more your loss than mine."

Jim Kincaid scowled. "God, I hate the old don't-worry-about-me-I'll-be-all-right routine. You're just like my mother."

Her face hardened. "Better I should be like your father."

Kincaid turned his back, furious. How dare she bring that up?

May Wheeler's hands trembled at her throat. She had really put her foot into it this time. "I'm sorry, Jim," she said, softly. "Look, take a couple of days off. I'll get Jack started on the new program and by that time you can have some new input."

By his stiff back she could tell he was still angry.

"I hope so," he said, stomping through the door.

She turned to face the bland white of her office and, opening the little cabinet, poured herself a drink. What would happen if she told Jim that one time she, too, had loved his father? That when he had disappeared out in the asteroid belt, part of her own soul had vanished. She could not guess how he would take it.

In his own room, hunched over his terminal, Jim Kincaid milked the library for ideas. Does the universe expand forever or does it expand just so far, then to collapse? The controversy still raged. The experimental evidence was still miniscule; the mass needed to cause collapse was still missing, but perhaps hidden.

Suddenly he sucked in his breath. He read the page on the screen again and again, unbelieving. How had he missed knowing this? But then none of the books accessible to his level of knowledge had ever mentioned this one obscure fact. This fact, this bit of information, this capsule of intelligence, this parcel of theory, became a bombshell of knowledge that blasted away the foundation of his script idea and caused the entire structure to collapse in ruins within his appalled mind.

"Omigod!" He called to a god in which he did not believe, and help did not come.

Waste. All the effort for nothing. In his story, in his life, in the world, in the Galaxy, in the Universe.

What he had not realized, and what a more detailed knowledge of four-dimensional geometry would have told him, was that the

basic premise of his story was an impossibility. Black depression overwhelmed him like a tidal wave. On the terminal keyboard, without thinking, without knowing what he was doing, he typed the Shrink's number.

The Shrink had an hour. At 2 A.M., that is, but the Shrink did not sleep.

Jim Kincaid slumped into the soft armchair. The pale, featureless walls of the cubical had not changed. The voice-controlled console faded into the wall in front of the chair, the video screen dark but ready to leap into brightness when needed.

"Your name is Jim Kincaid?" It was half a question, half a statement. "You made an appointment for therapy?"

Kincaid grunted. "Yeah."

The Shrink searched in the files for a moment. "You have not been here for over a year. What has happened?"

Jim found it hard to start. "I'm stuck," he said, finally.

"You're stuck."

Kincaid sighed. He hated to explain. "I'm supposed to be writing a script. Like a film script. But I keep going up blind alleys. My boss doesn't want pessimistic endings. My endings always end up with everybody dying or everything hopeless, and oh . . . what's the use?"

"You have a feeling of hopelessness?"

"You bet. And to top it all I just found out–after spending weeks working on this thing–I just found out that my basic plot device is useless because it is impossible to escape from the Universe. The escape velocity from the entire Universe is infinity–nobody can get out of this four-dimensional spacetime bubble. It's like the whole Universe is one big black hole. So my plot is hopeless from the start."

The therapy computer paused, obviously not programmed to deal with the intricacies of relativity. However, subject-matter was not important; the Shrink dealt entirely with process.

"I hear you say your plot is useless." The machine paused for the briefest moment, and Jim was ready to pounce and destroy if the next sentence was going to be: "How do you feel about that?"

But the Shrink knew Kincaid too well. "Why is your plot useless?" it asked instead.

Jim jerked his head irritably. "Didn't you hear me? I told you, because the basic premise is a scientific impossibility."

"And how does that make it useless?"

"I can't write about something that is impossible."

"Why can't you write about something that is impossible?"

Jim felt himself being ground to a fine pulp between the why's

and the how's. He clenched the chair arm. "Because I can't fool the reader into thinking that something might happen when it can't. I'm not like the rest of the crappy writers. They have no trouble writing five impossible things before breakfast every day."

The shrink again retreated into one of its pauses. "Then you are not like writers who write about impossible things."

"No. I must stick to what I know for sure."

"You must stick to what you know."

"That's not much, is it?"

"How much is it?"

Kincaid had a sensation as of sinking into a lake of deep, black, bottomless mud.

"It's not much," he said, finally. "That leaves me with very little to write about."

Now the Shrink said it: "How do you feel about that?"

And now Jim had no defense. "I feel I'm wasting my time. I'm supposed to be imaginative and creative, and yet I block myself completely off from new ideas if I insist on staying safely with what I know."

"What are you going to do about that?" the Shrink wanted to know.

"Not many choices about the matter." Jim could feel wheels of calculation beginning to turn rustily within his head. "Either I find good stories within the realm of what I know to be possible, or I let myself go and write about things I know to be impossible. What the hell, everybody else does it. Why not me? Or else I change my standards about what's impossible. Or just get out of the business entirely."

"It sounds as if you are beginning to think clearly," the Shrink said, in a smug voice. "Come back next week and tell me what you decide."

It appeared to be the end of the session.

Glumly, Jim slouched out of the office, ducking to clear the door. It always ended that way. What good was the damn therapist? He always had to work out all the answers by himself anyway.

Next morning he slept late, turned on his terminal to see what there was to do. He felt like doing nothing, but thought he had better do something. Moving around was better than sitting still.

Events of the day chugged upward on the screen. Garden club. No. Choral rehearsal. No. Tennis, handball, and swimming meets. Ought to, but he felt paralyzed. The satellite was filled with things

to do, and he wanted to do none of them. Noon hour organ recital at the church.

There, at least, he could escape in the semidarkness, while aloft the tall, white-headed Joshua Pike sat at the four-manual console. Now tall, slender, elderly, and elegant, Pike had been the first child born on Lagrange. His recordings and broadcasts had earned considerable exchange for the Lagrangian economy.

It would at least be peaceful. And perhaps it would jog something loose in his head. Kincaid's aural imagery equalled his ability to make visual pictures. He thought: could I record music directly from my head? How would it sound?

The idea intrigued him. It always excited him to poke around in the dark corners of his mind and come up with unsuspected thoughts that had been lying hidden there.

When Jim arrived at the church it was just beginning. Few seats were filled. Jim crept silently down a side aisle to a spot as secluded as possible and quietly sank into a seat.

All he could hear at first was a minor chord that whispered in his ear and swelled slowly into a melody of exquisite sadness. Harmonies washed calmly through his mind, building, fading back to nothing, then returning in a giant roar of triumph like an incandescence blazing across the darkness of death. Until it faded to a final whisper he sat paralyzed; when it ended he shook.

Finally he looked up to read the title projected on the annunciator. "Kom Süsser Tod." Bach's calm acceptance of inevitability. In his mind there blossomed the vivid image that had been dogging him for weeks: the Universe collapsing into blackness, the end of all life. Impinging on this picture and overlaying it was a spaceship fleeing through the asteroid belt; in a flash of incandescence it collided with a massive, pitted spheroid and disappeared.

Images tumble over images. His mother waiting, growing more silent day after day. A ten-year-old boy looking out at the black sky, filled with the tension of unfinished business, of a goodbye unsaid.

Suddenly Kincaid had to flee. To fly. He needed to move, to shake visions of death from his head. He crept out as silently as he had come in, stopped at his place for wings, and took the shuttle to endzone, where ponds sparkled around the circumference at the base of the artificial mountain. He disdained the elevator, but took the trail upward, knowing that the apparent gravity would decrease as he approached the central shaft. In a few minutes leaps and bounds carried him aloft in a ragged spiral.

He began to feel exhilaration. Something was working in his head,

trying to come out. He couldn't wait to find what it was.

At a ledge halfway up he met Tina. Tina Cummings, standing at the wall, wings folded under her arms, looking over the vast scene, the great satellite interior, extending all the way to the far end. Jim Kincaid's heart leaped at the sight. He remembered his shyness with her, the fantasies that filled his mind at her sight. This time he did not even blush. A recklessness drove him on.

"Tina! I'm glad to see you. On your way up? Will you fly with me?"

The rush of words came without premeditation, and Tina glanced around with surprise. It was not the stammering Jim Kincaid she had known in school.

"Sure," she said, pleased at the attention. Her dark face was framed with sleek black hair knotted behind her head. Jim had watched her fly from a distance many times, knew her to be strong and sure of herself.

They climbed as high as they could go. Few others were about at this hour. Most people were at work, and the eternal sun streaked its incandescent slabs through the longitudinal slits.

"What are you doing these days?" she asked as they climbed.

"I'm doing video visuals. Very fantastic."

"Oh yes." Her eyes flicked to the back of his neck. "I heard."

"Right now I'm hung up on the end of the Universe. I'm trying to find a way to prevent it. Do you realize that some time in the future when the Universe collapses inwards all this will be gone and all our efforts will have been wasted?"

Tina stared at him as she began to don her wings. "Isn't your worry a little premature?"

He laughed. The tilt of his head and the shrug of his shoulder showed the silliness he felt. "It's like the old joke. The man goes to his shrink and says he's awfully worried and depressed about the world coming to an end in another million years. The shrink says you've been misinformed. It won't end for at least a billion years. The man says, what a relief. That makes me feel much better."

"Well, there you are. I mean, it's even silly to worry about your own death," she said, bat-winged arms stretched out, poised on the ledge. "When your life is finished, that's the end of it. Every minute you spend being miserable is simply time wasted."

Jim buckled the last of the buckles, flapped the wings tentatively, and rose a foot off the platform. "But . . . but then what's the meaning of it all?"

"Oh, hell. The meaning is whatever meaning you give to it. Your

mind is the thing that attaches meaning to things. Everything else is just there. Come on, let's fly."

She rose on filmy wings and with strong strokes headed away from the platform toward the opposite end of the satellite. Kincaid followed, an unanswered question in his head.

"You're right," he shouted, as he caught up to her. "I can make my own life mean whatever I want. But what about the rest of it? Humanity, civilization, finding out what the Universe is all about? What's the point of it all if it's going to come to an end eventually?"

She turned to face him, hovering a few yards away. Silhouetted against a bright shaft of sunlight he became a dark angel with bright hair. She wondered, was this too absurd to take seriously, or was he really into something deep?

Finally she played it straight. "There is no point, Jim. There's nothing but whatever you make of it. If you go to church they'll tell you it's God's will, but they won't tell you where God was before the beginning of the Universe, and they won't tell you where he will be after the end of the Universe."

"Hell, that's an empty philosophy."

"Heaven or Hell, anything else is a delusion. Really, Jim, what kind of person goes around worrying about the end of the Universe? If I wanted to make a guess, I'd guess that it's your own imminent death that's bothering you. Why should a twenty-year-old kid be worrying about death? Your life is just beginning."

Kincaid stared back at her, feeling the dart strike deep. She was right, of course. His obsession with universal catastrophe was a coverup for fears closer to home.

"How do you know so much?" he asked. "You're no older than me."

She glanced down at the lake, two kilometers below. He could feel her shudder.

"I had a friend, a close friend. We split one day. Over something silly and stupid. That night he went through the airlock without a spacesuit. Then I had to learn what it's all about. I'm a fast learner."

"Oh yes." Jim took her hand. "I remember now. I'm sorry."

He felt drawn into those dark eyes. Another burst of erotic images cascaded through his mind and he turned away, his face becoming crimson.

"Let's fly," he shouted, to cover his confusion.

In an instant she had flown a swift circle about him. Her face became alive with excitement as she put the past behind her. "Let's take a dive. Then you'll feel what living's like."

He shied away. "I never tried it before."

"You can do it. It's a great blast. Come on."

She released him, moved her wings in a mighty power stroke and nosed down towards the periphery of the spinning satellite. Gasping, hesitating the barest instant, Kincaid followed her. It was like ski-jumping. The first time was terror mingled with exhilaration. Wings pumped him up to speed. The air tore through his hair.

Beneath them the lakes rotated in silent majesty. As they flew farther from the central core, the atmosphere, rotating with the satellite, began to buffet them and tear at their hair, carrying them faster and faster. Kincaid imagined how it would be to plummet straight down; his body jerked with a lightning-vivid picture of the final instant.

No. That would be the real waste. He still had too much to do. There began to grow in his mind a picture of the many years to be filled with the multitude of things to do.

"Now follow me." He caught Tina's words flung back at him through the quickening wind. She spread her wings and caught the air so that she was thrown forward and out. He followed suit, and the two of them began to level off into a descending spiral, propelled by the rotating satellite atmosphere.

Kincaid's breath came fast. It was a dangerous game, requiring strength and skill. As his blood pumped faster a fierce grin spread across his face. A vast joy enveloped him.

The ground and the lakes came closer, gyrating around them as the satellite spun. Faster the wind blew them until they nearly matched velocities with the ground.

"Try to land on water!" Her words came back to him in shreds, tattered by the gale.

The ring of lakes around the end of the cylinder was almost continuous, so the chances for a soft landing were good. A broad body of water was swinging up from behind; the two beat their wings steadily and strongly, trying to keep altitude and to gain speed.

"Okay, now drop," Tina called. They folded wings and made a clean fall of the last few meters. Their splash was impressive, water spraying to the edge of the lake. They did not descend far through the clear water, for a slight spread of the wings dragged them quickly to a halt.

Kincaid came to the surface gasping and spurting. Swimming with wings on was impossible. "Turn over and back kick," Tina instructed him.

Finally they made shore and pulled themselves out, as dripping

and bedraggled as a pair of wet pups. A couple on shore applauded. "Fine landing," they laughed.

Kincaid wiped the water out of his eyes. "We're not exactly dressed for this sport. Where can we go to dry out?"

"There's a bath house on the other side of the lake," the man on the shore said. "You can get a towel there."

There was not only a towel, but a sauna where they could hang their soaked clothing by the hot stones. Gratefully Kincaid lay alongside Tina on the wooden bench and steamed. The wood had been grown on Lagrange and it was real wood.

He touched her hand and felt her replying squeeze shooting electricity through his spine. He thought: this is the only meaning I can make of it. We are born touching and holding, and if we stop getting it then we are dead.

Tina said, "This is better than worrying about the fate of the Universe, isn't it?"

"It's better than almost anything. As for the Universe, that's no longer a worry. The Universe will live forever."

She leaned up on one elbow and looked at him; her black hair fell loosely over her breasts. "You solved your problem. How?"

He grinned. "Inspiration struck during our descent. It was as though my mind opened up. Because you were right, completely right. Why was I unable to save the characters in my script? Every ending I dreamed was another form of doom. It came entirely from my own fear of death. And this is the most futile fear of all, for it is the one thing we cannot avoid."

"And your solution?"

He took her hand in his, held it, kissed it, rubbed it on his cheek. "You'll see."

He undressed in the anteroom and stepped into the cylindrical gravless studio. The day with Tina had stretched into three and he felt a calm, warm glow all over his body. As he eased himself into floating position and allowed the lights to dim, he quickly sank into the state of sensory detachment in which nothing existed except his mind and the thoughts that floated to its surface.

The Pharigee civilization had spread over much of the Galaxy. Even though travel was limited to below light speeds, the long life of the Pharigees coupled with the time dilation had made such a spread possible. While each of the Pharigees had a lifetime measured in the thousands of years, the unique nature of his nervous system

and his natural radio connection to the central memory of his planet gave each Pharigee individual a continuity of thought and memory that spanned a period of billions of years.

From the center of his planetoid vehicle, Omicron watched the last stage of the em-ring construction. The machine, with dimensions that of a large solar system, had required fully ten million years to complete. But to Omicron, with his access to the central memory, it was as if he had been there at the beginning. Upsilon, facial fringes glowing excitedly, drifted into the room. He carried a portable video transmitter, ready to send the news of the great impending event to the civilized planets of the Galaxy.

"One more step, Upsilon, and it is complete," said Omicron.

"There will be celebrations throughout the Galaxy." Upsilon gave a many-legged, zero-gee dance.

"Your spirits are high. But save the jubilation for the outcome."

The control room began to fill with other members of the team. Their segmented bodies had a metallic sheen, and the facial fringes, fluorescing with excitement, made multicolored patches that reflected brightly from the instrument panels.

"Units 94325 and 95746 are now in place." The word came, not through a loudspeaker, but through a radio transducer that communicated directly with each individual in the room.

"Now we test," Omicron said. His communication with the machine was totally and directly by radio frequency. There was not a switch on the console before him. The readouts were purely a matter of redundancy.

Gradually Omicron fed power to the great ring-shaped machine. So vast was the structure that signals traveling over conventional electromagnetic channels would have taken many minutes to reach the farthest segments. A network of wormhole communicators had been established to allow instantaneous and stable control. Responding signals from each segment reported that at low power each segment was operating well. So far so good.

"We'll increase the power. Now it becomes critical."

The magnetic fields involved in the operation of the em-ring were of such a magnitude that the ability of normal matter to maintain solid form could no longer be assumed. Reinforcing fields became part of the structure.

The test continued for a very long time. Inflowing reports from the far-flung segments of the em-ring funneled into Omicron's mind for examination and storage. Upsilon's camera was set up and its controls instructed. The crucial moment was approaching, the event to

be recorded for history.

Power indicators approached their maximum levels. "We're consuming one-tenth the power output of the nearest three stars," Omicron informed Upsilon, for the benefit of the camera record. "If this test fails we have wasted much energy."

Upsilon emitted a whistle. "But the gamble is worth the risk. If we don't try, we'll surely die in the end, for our sun is within a Megayear of going nova."

"And if the experiment succeeds," Omicron replied, "we will have a source of power equal to the young sun we started with originally. Remember the beginning, ten billion years ago, when the first em-ring extracted energy from the center of the sun? Everybody expected that to be a permanent solution to the energy problem, but as you see, all solutions are but temporary. Except, perhaps, the solution we now test."

Upsilon, thousands of years younger than Omicron, had not yet incorporated into his memory the early history of the race and had not Omicron's perspective. "I must say that it has been very depressing living through a time when the talk is of nothing but diminishing energy sources."

Omicron cocked an eyestalk at the other. "Even so, there is no restraint on the profligate use of solar energy. An interstellar ship uses an appreciable fraction of an average star's energy output, and hastens the death of the star accordingly. Still, in a single Pharigee lifetime the symptoms of universal entropy death are difficult to notice. It is only with the long point of view available through our central memory that we can be aware of the fact that the Universe is aging, is running down."

"But now you will be able to reverse this process. A rebirth of the Galaxy." Inevitably the presence of the camera caused the conversation to become an interview; each sentence became a speech.

Omicron's attention had never wavered from the incoming signals. "The critical point is approaching rapidly. We are running at close to full power and soon will be breaking through the wormhole."

Even as he spoke flashes of light began to sparkle and flare within the circumference of the em-ring as energy began to come through. Since this energy was aimed away from the control room the direct beam was not visible, but a number of assorted meteors, asteroids, and other lesser objects found themselves caught in the radiation blast and instantly exploded in a violence of superhot plasma.

The major part of the beam was intercepted by the black, shrunken star located at the center of the em-ring. Soaking up the radiation

greedily, its surface presently began to glow red. The higher energy components of the beam initiated nuclear reactions that broke up the elements of the star, created neutrons and protons, and proceeded slowly to restore the star to its initial youthful, energetic, and low entropy condition.

Upsilon crowed in shrill jubilation. The rejuvenation of a dead star, first in galactic history, had been caught indelibly in his camera. Already the light shields had to be darkened in front of all lenses as the star's brightness increased beyond tolerance.

"Now the theory has been proven," Omicron said, in quiet celebration. "Somewhere outside this four-dimensional spacetime continuum there is a source of energy that we can tap through a wormhole. We can restore every dead star to its primal condition, add fresh, high-level energy to the universe, reverse the entropy death into which we have been decaying. Our species has a future ahead of it."

The lights came on as the screen went black. May Wheeler sat bemused, her hands clasped in front of her face, vertical lines furrowed between her eyes. Jim Kincaid's chair legs rasped as he stood up.

'Well," he said, his tone a challenge. "You got your positive ending, didn't you? How do you like its magnitude? Lighting up an entire star? Try to beat that!"

Wheeler cocked her head at Kincaid, then shook it wearily. "I'll admit it. You've got a large scale production. A gigantic concept. My oh my. Saving the entire Universe from dying. It's a great ending."

Her eyes twinkled. "Now what you need is a story."

HAIKU FOR THE L5

Gyroscopic pea,
this pod sealed safe with man's seed,
spinning high and free.

–Robert Frazier

THE ERASING OF PHILBERT THE FUDGER

by Martin Gardner

By the mid-twenty-third century capital punishment has been replaced throughout most of the civilized world by a punishment called "erasure." The criminal's head is placed inside an electronic machine called the "oblivion box." It takes only a few minutes to expunge from the brain all memories of events experienced after the first six months of life. This, of course, returns the criminal to babyhood. It has long been established that no one is born with criminal tendencies—all are acquired by experience. Over a period of years the erased "baby" slowly develops into a new adult. Because erasure turns a person into a different personality, with no memory of his or her former self, the punishment is feared almost as much as execution.

Another radical change in the administration of justice is the replacement of all judges, and some lawyers, by robots. Laws have become so numerous and complicated that only computers can remember all the details. Robot judges are carefully programmed to make only wise and logical decisions. It is impossible for a robot judge to lie. If a circuit in his brain malfunctions, and he makes any statement that is false, his pronouncements are declared null and void and a new trial is scheduled.

One of the most heinous crimes in the twenty-third century, on a par with murder and rape, is the crime of "fudging." This means a falsification of data in a scientific experiment. Such an enormous respect has developed for the sanctity of scientific method that anyone declared guilty of fudging is automatically sentenced to erasure.

Philbert X1729B was arrested for having fudged the data in a tooth-decay experiment he had supervised at the Oral Roberts Dental Research Laboratory, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Philbert could not afford a robot lawyer. His human lawyer, who was not very skillful, lost the case. At Philbert's sentencing the robot judge said:

"You will be erased at 3 P.M. on one of the six days of next week, starting with Monday. You'll be informed of the day at 10 A.M on the day of the erasure."

"But judge," said Philbert, "can't you tell me the day now?"

"No. The date has not yet been determined. I can assure you, however, that it will be Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,

Friday, or Saturday of next week. You won't know what day it is until we inform you on the morning of erasure day."

"Thank you, your honor."

It was the last sentencing of the day, so the judge pressed a button under his left armpit to turn himself off until the court opened the next morning.

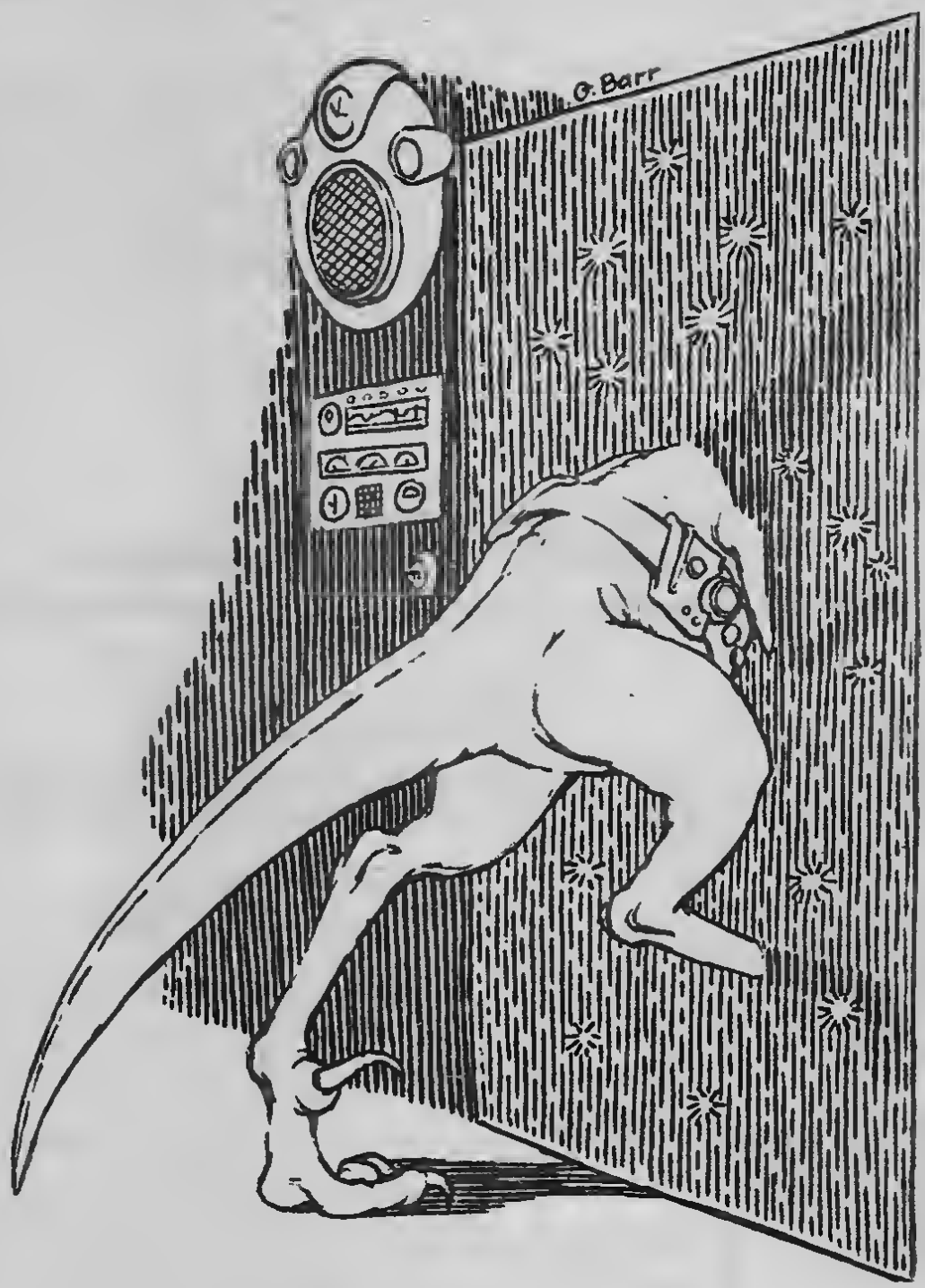
Sitting in his cell, Philbert began to think about what the judge had said. Suddenly he leaped to his feet with a yelp of joy. There was no way he could be erased without making the judge out to be a liar! This would guarantee him a new trial. Maybe his wife and friends would be able to raise enough money for a good robot lawyer.

What was Philbert's reasoning? See page 87 for the answer.

TWIST ENDING

by Barry B. Longyear

art: George Barr



Your editor, in an incautious moment, recently got both Mr. Longyear and Mr. Ford to working on stories about intelligent dinosaurs. Here, Mr. Longyear appears to have the last word on the subject.

GerG clasped his three-fingered, clawed hands, rotated his stooping torso on his massive hind legs, and closed his eyes in respect to the Great Ones.

"All right! Hold everything!"

"What's the matter?'

"Look at me! What silly getup have you stuffed me into this time?"

"Why . . . you're an offshoot of the Dromaeosaurus—the last of the warm-blooded dinosaurs. Probably the most intelligent—"

"I look like a bald ostrich with claws!"

"Come on! You're holding up the show."

"Well . . . this better not have one of those twist endings—can't stand them."

"Trust me."

"Okay, okay! Get on with it!"

"You are prepared, GerG, to enter the time frame and scout the future site for our dying race?" Of the Great Ones, the Presence towered above the others, then held out a clawed hand. "There exists but one node of time/future open within the range of our frames. You must go there and prepare the way for our exodus. Else, the supernova shall extinguish us all."

"That's it! I'll buy one outrageous assumption per story, but not three in one paragraph!

"What are you talking about?"

"Intelligent dinosaurs, time travel, and now a supernova thrown in—ridiculous!"

"Look, there's evidence supporting the existence of a supernova in Earth's past, and no one has a better explanation for the end of the dinosaurs."

"What about intelligence from a brain the size of a walnut?"

"The evidence shows that Dromaeosaurus had a very favorable brain-to-body-weight ratio. It's not outrageous to assume that a race of dinosaurs existed along with them much the way we now exist in

relation to chimps and aps."

"What about time travel?"

"Well . . . you said I could have one."

**sigh* "Okay, but how about giving me something to counter-balance this body? My back is killing me."*

"Sorry. I forgot."

GerG swished his heavy tail and opened his large dark eyes. "I am prepared, Oh Mighty Presence."

The Great Ones nodded, and GerG turned from the chamber and stepped into the corridor. He felt filled with the importance of his mission. *To be the savior of my race, and more. To be the messenger of the past to seventy million years in the future. If there are intelligent beings in that future, how they will venerate me! I will be their key to the wisdom of the ages!* At the end of the corridor, he came to the massive stone doors behind which stood an army of anxious scientists—and the door to the future. He placed his clawed fingers on the massive brass handles, then paused.

"You're sure, now, that this doesn't have one of those twist endings? I won't put up with it, if it does."

"I said to trust me, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Okay."

GerG pulled open the doors. Before him spread the huge laboratory, its far wall occupied by the shimmering blue-green of the time frame. Standing in front of it, a group of seven scientists twitched their tails as they checked computations, adjustments, and a mass of other details. One of them looked in GerG's direction, then turned back to the others. "It is the Chosen One."

"The Chosen One!" repeated the others in hushed voices.

GerG approached them and extended his clawed hands. Each of the scientists in turn bowed, touching his forehead to an outstretched hand. "I am ready. You may rise."

One scientist remained bowing. "Please step this way, Chosen One." The scientist pointed with his head.

GerG saw a small table littered with instruments, then walked over. He pointed a claw at a black box attached to a wide belt. "Is this the language translator that will allow me to communicate with any intelligent race I should find?"

"Language translator?"

"Knock it off! I'm on a roll."

The cientist bowed. "Yes, Chosen One." The scientist pointed at another instrument. "And this is your weapon, should you meet anything hostile." The scientist placed the instrument into a holster and held the belt out. GerG lifted his arms as another scientist pulled the ends of the belt around GerG' waist and buckled it. Another scientist placed the strap holding the translator around GerG's neck.

GerG stood tall and faced the time frame. "Is all in readiness?"

All the scientists bowed. "Yes, Chosen One, and may the Great Phlabod be with you."

GerG walked until he stood before the frame, then stopped. The shimmer of the surface filled his vision as his skin prickled with the aura of energy surrounding the doorway. He took a deep breath, placed a clawed hand upon his weapon, and stepped through.

"Hey! Why don't you watch where you're going?"

GerG looked down to see a furry amphibian nursing its bruised tail. "I beg your—"

"Watch out!"

GerG stopped his descending foot just in time to avoid crushing a fan-shaped mollusk. "I'm terribly sorry—"

A five-foot-long dragonfly buzzed angrily about GerG's head. "Get in line, you overgrown toad!"

A pink, hairless biped walked over and poked GerG in the arm. "Here, take a number."

GerG looked at the square plastic chip the human held. He looked up and held out his hands. "What is this?"

The human raised its brows and continued in a bored voice. "Look, all you extinct creatures are piling in here through the same time node. You'll just have to wait your turn."

END

"Oh, no! Not a twist ending! I told you I won't put up with it!"
"Aw, c'mon."
"C'mon, nothing! Move aside! I'm taking over!"
"You can't take over; I'm in control."
"I can't, huh? Just watch me!"

GerG pulled the weapon from his belt, aimed it at the human, and blew off its head. Turning quickly, he shot the dragonfly from

the air, then cut the amphibian in two. He saw the mollusk cowering in a corner. "We'll just see who has to wait in line, my crunchy friend." GerG lifted a foot and stepped on the shelled creature. Lifting his foot, GerG expected to find a mess, but, instead, found a squashed bundle of wires, integrated circuits, and broken bulbs. "Eh? What is this?"

He looked at the human, the amphibian and the dragonfly—nothing but wires, integrated circuits, tiny motors. Frowning, he looked at the surrounding landscape, aimed his weapon at it, and fired. A great hole tore in the scenery, he walked toward it, stepped through, and found himself back in the laboratory.

A scientist bowed. "Congratulations, Chosen One. You have passed the test. We are now certain of your ability to pave the way for our race's survival—that is, once we invent time travel."

END

"There!"

"That's a twist ending, too."

"What?"

"Look at it."

"Hmmm. I see. Those endings do kind of grow on you, don't they?"

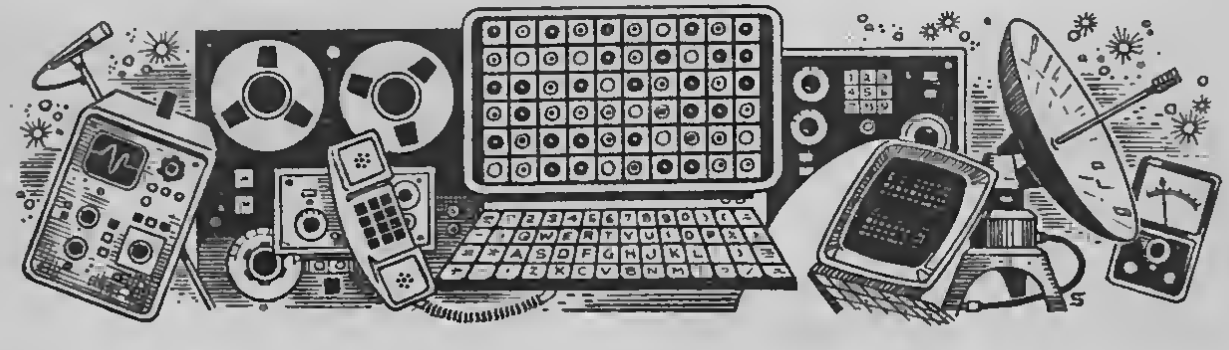
"How true. But, you know what the real twist ending on this piece is?"

"No, what?"

"You don't even exist!"

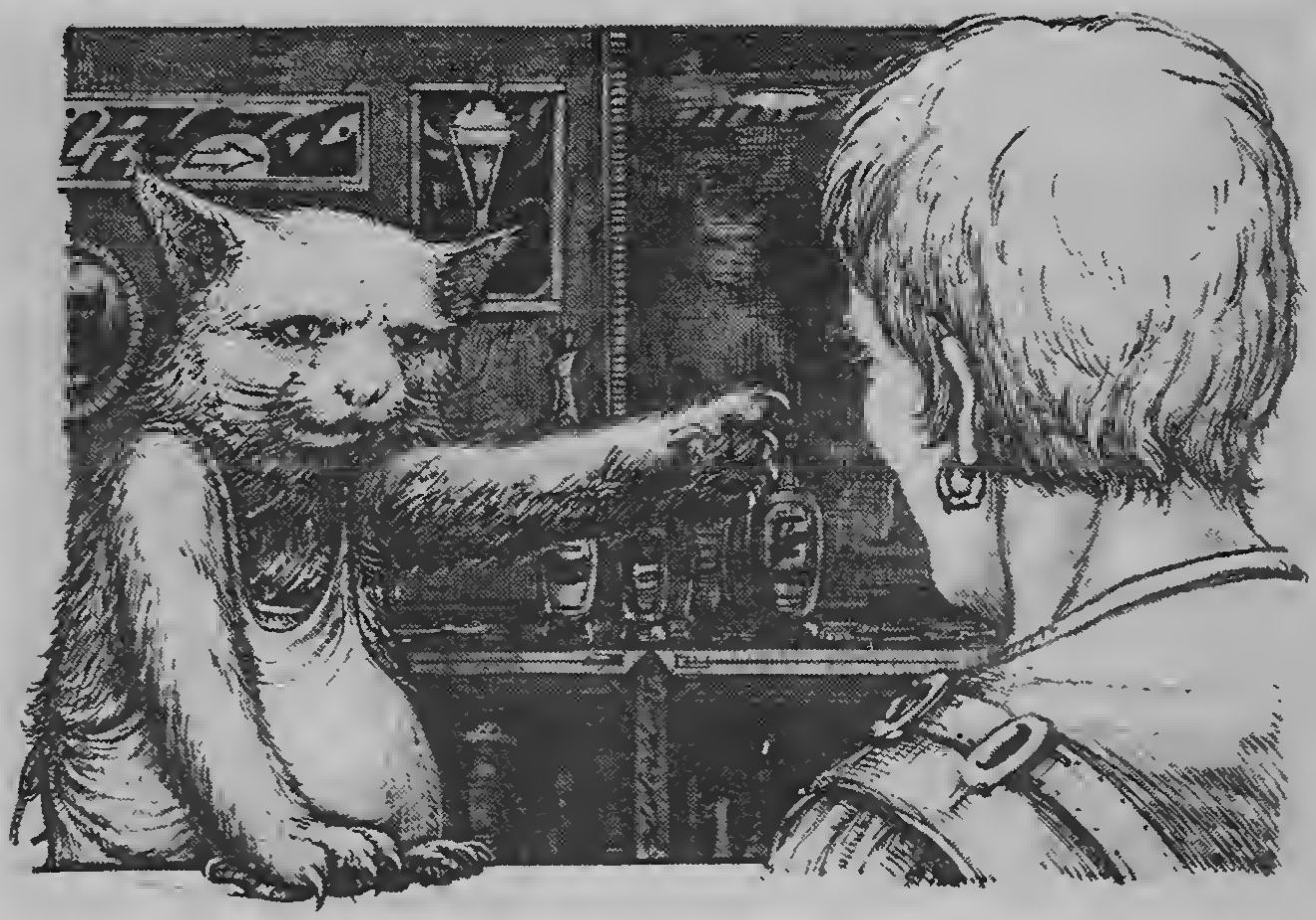
" . . . !"

END



THE RAINDROP'S RÔLE

by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.
art: Karl B. Kofoed



The author reports that he and his lovely wife are ettled now in their new home—just around the corner and down the street from their old one.

21 April 2314

Surveying the cramped, stuffy classroom, the young Terran sighed to himself. Packed onto three narrow benches were thirteen blue-pelted beings and six green ones: nineteen Level III students, of all ages and occupations. As stony as statues, none appeared eager or confident. There was also a scarlet *Tayloi*, lounging in the quasi-throne his servants had toted in, but he talked to his neighbor rather than acknowledging the tall blond.

Twenty students! thought Cooper in irritation. *How the hell am I supposed to teach 'em all to speak English? Don't these Nmentrorians know anything about language learning? Goddam. Twenty of 'em. And if they don't learn to speak well enough to ask questions,*

then my mission goes down the drain. Why the hell did the Chief send me out here, anyway?

Masking the mutterings in his mind, he said, "Good morning," and sat on his desk. Perched on its splintery top, he could see each whiskered face without standing. It was too informal a position—indigenous tutorial etiquette was as rigid as a granite cliff—but he wanted to loosen that escarpment. Besides, it kept sore feet and legs to a minimum.

He forced his lips to smile. "My name is Henry Cooper, and I am your teacher." Though he spoke slowly and enunciated carefully, half a dozen of his listeners didn't understand. Slouched behind the long wooden trestles they used as desks, they covered their mouths with paw-like hands so the Terran couldn't see them ask for a translation. Cooper heard the faint hiss of whispered conversations, and frowned. "You," he said, pointing at a green-furred *Naytakloi* in the last row, "what is your name?"

Panicked, the 'trorian's ebony eyes bulged. In reflexive agitation, the four claws of his right hand slid out and in, rasping across the trestletop. He goggled at Cooper, seemingly paralyzed, then twisted his head from side to side and begged for help. The elderly *Tayloi*, aristocratically crimson, came to his rescue by laughing aloud and hooting a liquid phrase. The *Naytakloi's* pointed ears drooped. He mumbled, "Hrimgin, suh."

"Hrimgin, eh?" Cooper contemplated him for a second longer, then turned his attention to the *Tayloi*. A small storm might soften things. "Anyer name?" he demanded, slurring deliberately.

The scarlet one looked blank. Cooper repeated the question—so slowly that everyone understood. The others tittered; the *Tayloi*'s glittering eyes narrowed. "Emtano," he declared, "*Khairn lo Tayloi*." Like a slap in the face, his words snapped the chuckling mouths shut.

"We do not speak Nmentrorian in this classroom," said Cooper with unfeigned severity. "Please repeat that in English."

"Repeat?"

"Say again." The other's sweat smelled like burned soy sauce; he tried not to wrinkle his nose.

"*Khairn lo Tayloi*?"

"Yes, please say that in English."

Emtano thought for a space, then said, "Lord of Khairn."

"Thank you." He bowed slightly before asking, "Why are you here?"

Emtano's feline features opened into a parody of surprise. "Want

study English, of course."

"And why do you want to study English?"

"Am Lord of Khairn," he replied, as if that answered everything.

"So?"

The fanged mouth yawned and shut without a sound.

After a short wait, Cooper realized that the question had meant nothing to Emtano, and cast about for another way of wording it. "Uh, do you need to speak English?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Am Lord of Khairn!" Indignant impatience honed the edge of his voice.

"Do you," tried Cooper, stroking his long jaw, "talk to many Terrans?"

"Yes." Satisfied, Emtano settled into the depths of his cushions.

"Why?"

Instantly, the *Tayloi* stiffened with fury. "I tell, am Lord of Khairn!" This time, his fist hit the lacquered tray laid across the chair's arms; it rattled, and writing implements flew. He gestured for his servant to collect them.

"Um," stalled Cooper, grimacing as he attempted to elicit a more complete answer, "what do you talk about?'

"Business," said Emtano, no longer daring to relax.

"What kind of business?"

"Trade, other things."

Cooper ventured, "Is this the duty of the Lord of Khairn?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Emtano closed his eyes in frustration. "Am duty of all Lords."

About to ask why, Cooper hesitated. The terrain didn't have to be—couldn't be—reshaped on the first day. But the process could be halted if the powerful aristocrat took a disliking to him. "Thank you," he said instead. "We'll talk about this again. Hrimgin—why are *you* here?" As he slid off the desk and brushed wood slivers from his hands, he pretended not to notice Emtano's relief.

24 October 2314

He was lying on the thick grey throw-rug that was his bed. Near the square window, incense burned in a brazier, less because he liked its peppery smell than because he could not stomach the stench from the open gutter in the alley below. Even when he forced the badly-warped window shut, the odor found its way around or through

the ripply glass. So the incense fumed day and night, and Cooper was known as the crazy Terran.

It seemed to be a popular opinion. His college roommates had choked on their beer when he'd told them he was joining The Service and going to Nmentror. His mother had cried for days. And his purple-cheeked father . . . "Insanity," he'd raged, "sheer rampant insanity! Passing up Political School to live in a mud hut somewhere Godknowshowmany light years away. It's insanity, boy!"

But he'd prevailed. Idealism and innate persistence had carried him through the anger and the ridicule. Though he was slow to make up his mind, almost glacially slow, he was, like the great iceflows, hard to stop once he'd gotten moving.

Heels thunked in the hallway. He rolled to his feet, glancing into the clouded mirror to smooth his hair. It had to be Jenny Wiznowski, a Commercial Attache he'd met at a trinket shop by the spaceport. They'd gone out a few times—mostly to the theater on the Terran Compound—and he was fond of her. He'd invited her over to meet, and to like, the beings to whom he'd devoted himself.

The thin door crackled under her knock. He forced himself to say "Just a minute," and to take three deep breaths—*mustn't seem pathetically eager to see a friendly Terran face*—before he flicked the latch switch and smiled.

"I thought I'd never find this place!" she exclaimed, swirling in like a spring gale. "But I'm not too late, am I? It's good to see you, Henry." A tall woman, with big bones and a broad face, she was well-proportioned, and athletic enough to carry her size gracefully. She hugged him, reminding him of warmth and of softness, then stepped away. Her perfume stayed behind to please his nose, to pang his heart. "What a neighborhood, my God, I thought Rio was bad, but out there—" she pointed at the window "—shoulder to shoulder crowds of un—" she caught herself before saying "unmen," Terran slang for Nmentrorians "—crowds, I could hardly get the car through!" Standing in the middle of the room, she pivoted to scan it. "This is a *dump*, Henry. Whatever led you to rent it?"

"My finances," he laughed, starting to close the door. "The Service doesn't—"

A neighbor kitten burst through the crack.

"Hey, stop!"

Ignoring him, she scampered up to Jenny. Uninhibited and utterly fascinated, she ran a lightly-sheathed claw down her calf, and babbled, "You're smooth where he's fuzzy!"

"What did it say?" Jenny asked.

She tugged the hem of the Terran's skirt, and sniffed at its fabric. "And you wear this stuff! He does, too, but not the same kind, and—"

"What?" she repeated. "Henry, what's its name and what's it saying?"

He decided not to translate. "She doesn't have a name."

"Oh, the poor thing!" Bending, she scooped the kitten up and cuddled her. "Is she an orphan? Abandoned?"

"No, just—"

The 'trorian squirmed free and dashed across the floor, shouting, "There's another one, come look!"

"—that they don't name their children until they're ready to start their education." And he hoped she wouldn't ask him why.

"How strange. Why—"

A high-pitched snarl cut her off. When a threatening hiss answered it, she hurried to the door and peered into the dim, smelly hall. "What are they doing?" she gasped.

Hell! He hadn't wanted her to see this, not yet, not before she'd made friends with some of his neighbors. Embassy people weren't briefed on 'trorian child-rearing—they weren't expected to witness it—she wouldn't understand. "Maybe you'd better—"

"No, I want to watch."

Two six- or seven-year-old kittens crouched at either end of the narrow corridor. They were insulting each other, and slashing the air with their young claws. Suddenly the Jenny-sniffer rolled back her lips, bared her milk-white fangs, and charged.

"Henry, they—"

"Ssh!"

The far one waited till its attacker had bounded into the air, then feinted right and sprang left. Ricocheting off the wall, like a bank shot in a pool game, it pounced on the other's back. Jaws around the Jenny-sniffer's neck, it raked her belly. With a yowl the injured one leaped and spun. The hall became a twisting spitting tangle of bloody blue fur. Fangs gnashed. Claws tore.

"Stop them, Henry, they're hurting each other!"

He shook his head.

"Well, if you won't—" She made a move towards the melee.

Catching her from behind, he manacled her elbows with his fingers. "No," he whispered into her ear, into her warm, perfumed ear, "no, they have to go at it, it's the way it works."

"Let me go, they'll kill each other!"

"Uh-huh." A piteous yelp pierced his ears. *Damn*. While the victor backed away, the Jenny-sniffer spasmed on the floor. And died.

"It's over now. Come on back in."

She permitted herself to be towed into Cooper's room. Her face was slack; her eyes, glazed with shock. "Nobody came, nobody helped."

"They never do, not even the mothers." And that indifference . . . he had a theoretical understanding of what they'd just observed, but for the life of him, he couldn't empathize with any mother, even one of several litters of fraternal quadruplets, who could stand to see three-fourths of her children murdered by each other. "It's just their system, that's all. Happened a dozen times since I moved in."

"But why?" she wailed, turning to watch him close the door. Her eyes clung to him, but not for support. There was fright in them, and wariness.

"Call it, uh . . . culturally sanctioned natural selection—survival of the fittest. The Nmentrorians despise weakness—you know that. This way—" he nodded at the latched door "—they get the toughest genes into the pool." Involuntarily, he shuddered. "It seems inhuman, but so are they. And remember: a thousand years ago, Terran mothers buried at least half their children, if not more. It's . . ." he groped for the word " . . . expected."

"I want to go home."

"Sure." He nodded sadly. "I'll walk yoi to your car."

At the top of the steps, she paused. "Shouldn't you bury it?"

"Her family will handle that," he lied. He couldn't bring himself to tell her that the Jenny-sniffer would remain, staining the floor with her blood, until someone became irritated enough by her corpse's dissolution to throw it out the window into the gutter. It was customary, and custom, like a deep-channeled river, can be shifted only by degrees. "C'mon," he said, "you'd better get back."

4 December 2314

"Minaro, tell me why a Terran should stay at your hotel, instead of somewhere else." He gestured at the squirming hotel manager as he waited.

Minaro, blue like every *Taksoloi*, looked hard-pressed. Three months earlier, with a different teacher, he would have answered glibly; that day, he didn't seem to know what to say. In the Level VI class, Cooper refused to accept the usual replies. "Well," he said at last, apparently unable to think of anything better, "all Terrans stay there."

"I didn't." Leaning against the lightboard, he smiled to himself. The students were always dismayed when he forced them to seek

new paths. Perhaps they sensed change's corrosive effect on tradition. In his course, though, they'd have no choice. They were sand, and he was the wind.

"Why not?" wailed Minaro.

"It was too expensive."

"Where you did stay?"

"Where did you stay?" he corrected absently. "I went to the *lo Ke*, which costs only *lud g'na* a night."

"But that is trashiest place, only for *Naytakloi*," complained Minaro.

"So?" He repressed the urge to scratch his most earnest student between the ears.

"Terrans are the same as *Tayloi*, must stay at *Tayloi* hotel."

"Are we now?" He turned to the *Tayloi* he'd first met eight months earlier, the aristocrat he'd oeen disturbing through four levels. "Do you agree, Emtano?"

The Lord of Khairn, unhappy, hunched a flaming shoulder protectively. "Terrans," he said slowly, "should be the same."

"Why?" Cooper shot back. He held his breath; the response would indicate the progress the mission was making.

"Custom, tradition, and treaties say *Tayloi* Terran identical. But you," he continued, leveling an ivory-tipped finger at Cooper, "are not. So I don't know."

"What do you think?"

"First I ask, on Terra, can a Terran buy land?"

"If he has the money."

"Any Terran?"

"Yes."

"Then Terrans and *Tayloi* are the same, because only *Tayloi* can buy land."

"But we have no *Naytakloi*," pointed out Cooper, "and all *Tayloi* have *Naytakloi*. Now what do you say?" *Ask me* why *we don't have them. Go on, ask*!

"Don't know," grunted Emtano sullenly. He subsided into his chair. "Too different."

18 January 2315

The rug was soft under Cooper's broad back; the incense, sharp in his nose. On the dirty ceiling, his eyes traced a route from one wall to the other through the network of cracks. He played the game every night after dinner. It focused his attention on the present and the trivial; it kept him from dwelling on the past or the important.

After an hour or so, he generally fell asleep, anesthetized by the tedium of time-wasting.

That night, he rolled onto his stomach in defiance of the rules. He didn't care. The ceiling was too well-known; the crack-path, too familiar. Picking moodily at balls of fuzz clinging to his grey rug, he indulged in self-pity. He wallowed deeply—so deeply that he didn't hear the feet, or the knock, or the scrape of the opening door.

"Henry?" called a warm but cautious voice.

The draft brought perfume past his nostrils. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Jenny! Come in, come in." He scrambled erect and made the ineffectual gestures of an unprepared host. "Hey, I'm sorry, didn't expect, if I'd known—please pardon the mess, I—"

She laughed. "It's all right." Sinking into a cross-legged position on the rug, she said, "Listen, I've found a place for you at the Compound! You can move in right away, tomorrow if you want."

He winced, and hoped she didn't see it. "Jenny, I can't afford—"

"I know that, you'll share the place with two other guys, and they'll give you a good deal on the rent." Forestalling his objection, she went on, "It's beautiful, really, and the Compound—you've seen it. Lawns, and elms, and geraniums—you won't be so homesick out there. And besides," she continued, talking right through his hand-upheld attempt to interrupt, "you *need* to do it, you're getting a reputation, you know, and it's not a good one. You're the only Terran on-planet who lives away from the Compound, and people are starting to talk. Doesn't that bother you?" She watched his face. "Aren't you lonely out here?"

"Um . . ." He shrugged, but not on the inside. He *was* lonely. Though letters and tapes came from home and from friends scattered across the galaxy, they weren't enough. He read or played each one dozens of times, till it was too fragile to withstand anything more rugged than storage, yet it still didn't satisfy him. He needed—and knew he needed—and knew Jenny knew he needed—a human to talk to. Yet he tried to evade. "I've got lots of 'trorian friends."

"Your drinking buddies?"

"Uh-huh."

"Tell me they understand you."

"Um . . ."

"Tell me you have *real* 'trorian friends."

She was right, of course. Friendship, true friendship, depends on more than bellying up to a bar with someone. It calls for a comprehension of each other's mind that's almost impossible when the two

are of different races or cultures. It becomes totally impossible when they differ in both culture and species—and Cooper, despite his fluency in Nmentrorian and his nine months on-planet, was only barely acculturated. He had acquaintances, colleagues, drinking partners—even occasional confidants—but he didn't have a friend. "I don't," he admitted. "But—"

"Ssh!" She came to him on all fours. She pushed against his shoulder until he was supine, and then crawled on top of him, blanketing him with her warmth, and her softness. "Ssh," she whispered, "save it for later."

But afterwards, even before the glow had worn off, she had to know, "Why *are* you here?"

"I'm on assignment to teach English." *And more*, he thought, but didn't say, because there were rules, and regulations, and they bound one even with one's lover.

"But what good are you doing?"

"I'm carrying out my assignment, exposing them to—"

"I asked about good, not harm."

"I'm teaching them English. They'll need it if they're going to become part of the System."

"Why did you take it?"

"The assignment?" At her nod, he sighed. The truth was too nebulous; it was a feeling for which there weren't adequate words. "The credits."

"Aw, come on, Henry."

"And because I trust The Service."

"That was a mistake."

"Was it?"

"This rathole?" She snorted as she indicated the room.

"It does call for a little suffering on my part, but—"

She made a rude noise.

"Why are you doing this to me" he demanded.

Her face softened, and she sat up. Wrapping her round arms around her knees, she looked through the dirty window at the setting sun. A stray ray sparkled in the sweat on her breast. "I don't know, Henry. I get the feeling that . . . that *you* think you're wasting your time, accomplishing nothing . . . maybe I love you a little, so I sense the way you're all torn up, and . . . and I guess I'm trying to help you clarify the issues in your own mind."

"Thanks, Jenny." He reached up and kissed her. "But I know what I have to do—and if I don't see the results . . . it's 'cause I'm like the raindrop that doesn't realize its role in the avalanche."

"Don't give me any of *that* bullshit."

"All right."

"Henry—everybody knows The Service is a dead end. Why did you give up everything—your family, friends, even your future—for it?"

"Uh . . . I approve of its goals, and feel obligated to contribute to their achievement?"

"I told you, no more bullshit."

"All right. I'm soft in the head. Satisfied?"

"Yes," she laughed, as the last of the twilight departed, "yes, I am." She stretched out on the rug next to him, and slid her arm across his bare chest. "G'night, now."

"Good night." And he slept better for the knowledge that he hadn't committed himself to the weather-proofed irrelevancy called the Compound.

9 February 2315

The *Taksoloi* bartender beamed at the Terran who often dropped in. "They brought a new case for you today, Henry," he said as Cooper approached. "How are you these days?"

"My claws are still sharp," he smiled, easing himself onto a stool designed for alien haunches. The tail notch made it feel precarious.

Motali fetched the beer; after he'd opened it and set it before his only foreign customer, he said, "Your accent's getting better—"

"It should," interrupted Cooper, "I've been here almost a year now."

"—but you shouldn't use idioms that don't fit you. It sounds funny for you to talk about claws." His own flashed out, and he separated his whiskers with the four-inch needles of ivory. "You should use an idiom that suits you, like 'My eyes are still bright,' or 'My ears still hear vermin at night.' " He made a perfunctory swipe at a streak of moisture and waited for Cooper's reaction.

"Sounds good," shrugged the Terran, wiping foam from his upper lip. "Will you give me some practice?"

"Sure, but let me serve those guys who just came in. Be with you in a minute."

As the bartender moved towards a group of newcomers, Cooper greeted the *Naytakloi* he knew. Most were familiar to him—more, most were used to him. Except for one, a green-pelted stranger who gaped, and began to push his way through the crowd. Two regulars stopped him; Cooper heard a rough voice growl, "Siddown and leave him alone. He don't come here to get scratched by a mudpaw, and

we don't want him chased away. Siddown, willya?" The stranger obeyed, but still gawked.

Cooper lifted his glass to him, and to his self-appointed bodyguards, then sighed. He should have waved the 'trorian over—retaining roots won't parch on a cloudy day—but even the sun takes time off. He turned back to Motali. "I hear your boy's going to be tested next week."

"Yes, he is." The plump bartender radiated joy. "He's got a damn good chance, too, I can tell you that right now—anybody who finishes training first in his class does. And out of the best private center in the district, too!" He reached under the bar and fumbled around for a sheaf of glossies. "Here," he said, straightening up and nudging them towards Cooper, "we took these at the Completion. Don't he look good?"

The blue youth stood tall and proud. In one picture he hugged his mother, in another he wrapped tails with his father, in a third he linked arms with both. Through them all, his right hand clutched a wooden rod that Cooper guessed was his diploma.

"He sure is big."

Motali slipped the photos into an envelope that he laid on the shelf. "Well, he should be—his father was the Lord of Khairn. Mileta was the Lord's first pick."

"He's one of my students."

"Emtano, Lord of Khairn?"

"Yes, that's him. He's a quick study."

" 'Course he is; that's what the *Tayloi* are chosen for. He's a nice guy, too, for a Lord—treated Mileta just fine. Ah," he continued without resentment, "she was gorgeous in those days. I was damn lucky to get her; must have been twenty guys waving their ears at her. But the Lord had just hired me, and I guess he recommended me—anyway, she moved right from his palace to my quarters."

"Say," began Cooper, with some hesitation, "I've got a couple questions about all that, if you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all," said Motali expansively, "go right ahead."

"First, how many females does a Lord get?"

"Five, one right after another—and I don't mind telling you, Henry, that my boy's looking forward to picking the five most beautiful girls in the city if he wins."

"And how many does a King get?"

The bartender looked surprised. "None—what would he do with them?"

Though puzzled, Cooper let that pass. "Another thing I've never

understood: what changes the fur to scarlet?"

"For a teacher you're pretty damn ignorant." He smiled to take the sting out of his banter.

The Terran defended himself nonetheless. "Hey, I teach English, and I've been here less than a year. I don't know everything yet—you've got to give me time."

"Yeah, I keep forgetting. Well, after a Lord's finished with his five females, the Royal Surgeon castrates him—"

"Castrates?" he repeated in astonishment.

"Sure, castrates. Anyway, afterwards, the new hormone balance changes the color of his fur."

"But, but," he stammered, "why do they castrate him?"

"Because if they didn't, he wouldn't be a Lord."

Cooper shut his open mouth and thought about that for a while. "I see," he said at last. "Or, I think I see. Tell me, all kittens are blue, right?"

"Right."

"Why do some become green?"

"Oh, that happens at the first test—didn't you know?"

"The last time that was held was right after I got here, and I wasn't understanding much of what went on then. Could you explain it?"

"Sure, it's easy. See, they take all the kittens between eight and nine years old—the ones who've just been named, you know about that?"

Cooper thought of the blood-spattered hallway and nodded.

"Well, they lock them up in these big rooms, a hundred to a room."

"Uh-huh," he said. Later, for his report, he'd have to translate from base-eight to base-ten, but for his own comprehension, it was unnecessary.

"Then they tell them, don't eat anything you find in the room. They wait a day or so, and release sixty diseased rats."

"For the kittens not to eat?" he guessed.

"Exactly! You're getting to understand us. Anyway, they're all pretty hungry by that time, so they have to exert self-discipline to keep from gobbling up the rats. Those who crack, who eat, get the disease themselves. Before they recover, their fur turns green and part of their brain is damaged. The testers don't let anybody out till all the rats are eaten—which is why we call them *Naytakloi,* the sixty percent."

"Nobody eats two?"

"They're small kittens, Henry—and big rats. Usually, by the time

a kitten is hungry again, either all the rats have been eaten, or he's sick."

"Uh-huh." Cooper nodded thoughtfully. "That explains a lot. Then, out of those one hundred, twenty take *Tayloi* training?"

"And fifteen have to settle for being *Taksoloi,* right. The sixty percent, the fifteen percent, and the three percent."

He paused to fix the figures in his mind. "It seems to me," he said cautiously, knowing he should shake the bedrock of the bartender's contentment but unwilling to shatter a friend, "that it's a pretty harsh system. Why do you use it?"

"Why?" Motali repeated in bewilderment. "Because . . ." His tail swished wildly. "Henry, you're always asking me why, why, why. All I can say is what I always say: it's our system. We've always had it, as far back as our history goes. I mean, it's The Law."

16 May 2315

Jenny opened the door for him, but with displeasure, as one opens one's files to the tax man. "Yes?" she asked, making the question a snub.

"Hi, I—" Her cold features chilled the words off his tongue; he floundered, and spun his hands through helpless circles. "Can I come in?"

"Briefly." Backstepping inwards, she swung the door wider, yet held it between them like a shield. "But I am expecting company."

"Oh, sure, sure, I—" Awkward and unhappy, he waited till she motioned him into the living room.

There was a desk in the corner, a severe, utilitarian collection of drawers and read-out screens. She took its stool. Her nod pushed him into a straight-backed, armless chair halfway across the room. She let him absorb the distance for a while, then asked, "What can I do for you?"

"Um, I . . ." He knew then that the visit was futile, that he should rise and turn and leave without another word, but that wasn't his style. A persevering optimist, he wouldn't give up without a fight. He couldn't. It might become a habit. Gently, he rubbed his sole on the deep green carpet. "This is a nice place."

"Thank you," she said automatically, but then: "You didn't come here to compliment my decor. Or to talk about the weather."

"I . . . haven't seen you for a while, and haven't been able to reach you. Is everything okay?"

"With me?" She shrugged. "Just fine." Her finger touched a button on the desk; a mellow chime sounded and a baritone voice said,

"Time: 4:58 p.m." "I'm afraid you'll have to—"

"Wait. Us. I mean . . . I like you; you used to like me. But three months now you're not in, you don't call back, you don't stop by . . . why?" He opened his hands and extended them to her—then sensed her scorn, felt silly, and dropped them. "Why?" he repeated.

"You don't know?"

"No." He shook his head, denying it to himself as well as to her.

"You can't give me what I'm looking for."

"Which is?"

"Augmentation, reinforcement, synergy. The whole has to be greater than the sum of its parts—and with us, Henry, it's not."

"But you're a Commercial Attache and I know this world like—"

"Professionally I'll deal with you, but it's personally I'm speaking of."

"I—"

"Quit The Service, then maybe you'll have a chance." She leaned back and folded her arms. "It's ruining you. Living in filth, exhausting yourself teaching English to grubby little unmen, being laughed at by all your compatriots—you think that's what I want in a man? No way, Henry. You wouldn't even move onto the Compound when I set it up for you. So now it's done." She swiveled around on the stool. "You can find your own way out." The baritone announced, "5:00 p.m."

Slowly he got to his feet, and studied the spill of her hair. If only he were permitted to talk! If only he could tell her . . . but he couldn't, and she wasn't the believing kind anyway. "Good-bye," he said instead, and left to pace the streets.

Where he walked, he didn't know. In melancholy, for one. In gut-wrenching emptiness, for another. The streets all felt the same, all crowded and noisy and smelly. He drifted through them like a raincloud looking for thirsty farmers. Which his own people weren't. Not those on the Compound, not if the only one who'd cared for him felt like that. Not those on Terra itself; it was too far away in both mind and space. Not even those in The Service, unless he chose to end his mission. Which he wouldn't do, for he would not quit. Not twice in one day.

That left Nmentror and its—*people, dammit! Not natives or unmen or anything else. They got hearts and minds and souls, and that's got to make 'em people.* Its affable, talented, accepting people. He'd pour his gift on them—and if they didn't plead for it, they'd surely get used to it.

With quickening steps, he headed home.

Hrackos was a dutiful Level X student—he memorized the dialogues, knew his vocabulary, and worked hard on his accent—but he was thrown by Cooper's question.

"Why," repeated the Terran patiently, "do you continue to work for a master who beats you and who starves you?"

"I—I do not understand, Henry."

"Look," he said, "you told me that your master beat you yesterday, right?"

"Right."

"Had you done wrong?"

"No, I told you—he was drunk."

"You also said that he has not given you food for some time."

"Yes, this is also true."

"Then why do you obey him?"

Hrackos appeared confused for a moment, then tried to eliminate the Terran's ignorance. "Henry," he said gently, "I must obey. It is The Law."

"Does The Law say you must obey an evil master?" asked Cooper incredulously. He felt like a hurricane that's failed to break a picture window. *All these months . . .*

"Yes, it does." Hrackos nodded his solemn green head. "The Law says that a *Naytakloi* must obey his *Taksoloi* and his *Tayloi*, his supervisor and his owner. If one disobeys, then he violates The Law, which disturbs the harmony of the universe. Harmony cannot be restored until The Law is violated in the opposite direction, by an equal amount."

He faced the ruler he'd been working on for eighteen months. "Emtano—hasn't Hrackos's master violated The Law?"

"Of course he has," snapped the aristocrat. "Repeatedly and ruthlessly. And he will, eventually, receipt his just deserts."

"Um, 'receive his just desserts,' is the idiom. Will the other Lords punish him?"

Emtano looked up from the note he was scribbling. "We? Punish him? Never."

"Why not?"

"None may repri— repri—"

"Reprimand?"

"Thank you. —Reprimand a Lord, except for the harmony-chasing universe." He scowled. "You have a saying about the mills of God grind slow—so is it here. Give us time. Perhaps we may hasten the universe."

"In the meantime, Hrackos, why don't you violate The Law equally and oppositely, to restore harmony yourself?"

"I dare not."

"Do you fear punishment?"

"No, Henry." A smile stretched his gaunt features. "I fear that his actions might even now be restoring harmony. Were I to violate The Law, I might re-introduce disharmony. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes," nodded Cooper, "I do." He looked at his watch and muttered, "Time's up—class dismissed. See you all tomorrow." As he preceded his students through the exit, he wondered whether the Advanced Conversation class was exactly what he needed to restore his peace of mind. At least in a beginning course he didn't have to listen to such disquieting answers.

28 October 2315

Cooper had taken a full ten steps down the dark hallway before he understood what he had just done. He half-turned, and gazed back to the rusty smear at the top of the staircase. From there he looked to the open window, through which he'd flung the torn body of a six-year-old kitten. If he remembered correctly—he tried to reconstruct his mental state—he'd taken a sniff, thought *that's annoying*, grabbed it by the half-severed tail, and swung it into the open air. He remembered with a flush of shame how he'd made the splash in the gutter a beat of the song he'd been whistling.

Instead of proceeding to his room, he finished his turn and went back down the stairs. A ten-minute walk through the muddy streets took him to the hypergraph office, where he sent a message to the Directorate. The extra fee for priority delivery gave him pause; if he paid it, he'd have to walk to work for the next week. "Oh, hell," he shrugged as he handed the additional coins to the girl behind the counter, "I need the exercise anyway."

Going out, he fantasized about him and the girl, about gazing into her soft, round eyes, about feeling her fur on his bare skin. Then, to the astonishment of those nearby, he slapped himself hard on each cheek. It didn't make her less attractive, but it did remind him of another way to look at her. He kept his eyes on the street the rest of the way home.

11 December 2315

It was his last day; the ship for Terra via Kouande and Snecto would leave the next morning. Sitting on his desk in the classroom, he tried to answer the rapid-fire questions of his Level XII students.

"Why are you leaving?" demanded Menala with an air of exasperation. "We still need you as a teacher."

"You'll get another," he reassured her. "There are lots of Terrans on the Compound who want to work here, to earn a little extra money."

"But we like *you*," insisted Emtano, "and you like us. So why are you going?" His gesture dislodged the lacquered tray. His servant started for the mess, but the *Tayloi* waved him back and picked it up himself.

Trying not to show his pleasure, Cooper explained, "I haven't seen Terra in two years, and I'm . . . do you know the word 'homesick'?"

"Sure," said Hrofa vehemently. "Means that all the time you're thinking of your family and friends, right?"

"Right. I'm homesick."

"But Henry," urged Mogano, "your home is here now, since you've been here for almost two years, yes?"

"*Only* two years—and I'd been on Terra for 25." A hand in the corner caught his eye. "Yes, Hrulamo?"

The *Naytakloi* was naturally shy; his green fur bristled in embarrassment. But he had a question to ask, and nothing would satisfy him but an answer. "Henry," he said, picking his words carefully, "you came here to do a job, right? You were to teach English. Now you're about to leave, but we only speak half-English, not whole English like you. gwhy are you leaving before the job is finished?"

It was a difficult question, but there was joy in Cooper's heart when he heard it. "Well, Hrulamo, it's complicated. Let me put it like this: if I do not speak perfect English, then I can not be a good teacher, right?"

"Why?"

"Because I would teach you the wrong phrases, or I wouldn't be able to hear your mistakes, or if I did hear them, I couldn't correct them, right?"

"Oh. Right."

"Now, I've been here two years. Outside this room, I speak only 'trorian. Outside this room, I think only 'trorian. My English is not as good as it was. I can't hear mistakes any more; I can't correct them. Do you see what I mean?"

Slowly, the right eyes of the students began to wink. They understood the reason at last. Hrulamo struggled to paraphrase it. "You're going because everything sounds . . . normal, right? Nothing sounds . . . abnormal? You . . . are becoming more like us, less like the Terran teacher you were." He laughed as an idea hit him. "Hey,

pretty soon, Henry, you'll be a student again!"

Cooper smiled and slid off his desk. "Exactly, Hrulamo, exactly."

9 April 2316

The Section Chief, grey of hair and beard, looked genuinely happy. "Jesus, Henry," he said, as Cooper dropped into the proffered chair on the other side of the desk, "I thought sure you'd gone native. Damn near two years, that's the longest anybody's lasted there. How'd you keep from crossing over?"

"Wasn't easy, Jeb." He raised his eyebrows and glanced at the bookcase. "Why, thank you, I'd love a bourbon."

The Chief waved a lethargic hand. "Help yourself, you bum. You know where it is."

"Thanks." He left the comfortable armchair for the built-in bar. "Can I fix you one?"

"Not on duty."

"If you mean to embarrass me, you can't. I'm on furlough, remember?" He chuckled and went back to his seat, saying, "I only held my cultural ID for about eighteen months. But I didn't feel the transformation; it was too gradual. Just one day, I noticed I wasn't asking questions any more—everything was familiar, everything was . . . normal. Soon as I saw that, I sent off the hypergram."

"Smart move." He looked wistfully at the glass in Cooper's hand. "I know you're working on your report, but can you give me some idea of what it's going to say?"

"Sure." Sipping the warm liquor, he arranged his words. "First, Nmentror is extremely dangerous: the people unquestioningly accept the decisions of the top men, who also happen to be the most qualified. Their system is stable, with enough provisions for upward mobility to keep all members of society satisfied. Not one purely hereditary position on the whole damn planet."

"How does that make it dangerous?"

Cooper thought of a small corpse plummeting into an open gutter. "There's no sympathy for the weak, Jeb. No quarter asked, none given. And they follow orders. They'll be deadly competitors if things aren't changed before they get into space on their own."

"Can things be changed?"

"Sure." Th bourbon felt good in his throat. "In time." He watched the ice cubes cuddle together. "With enough men."

"How many?"

Cooper shrugged. "I was there for two years; I taught twelve classes with a total of 240 students. I came into close contact with

maybe another thirty or forty 'trorians. So say I met less than 300 often enough to look for any effect."

"Go on."

"Probably half were unchanged. Maybe a hundred learned to ask 'what?' or 'when?' Twenty or thirty got to 'how?' And I'd guess only ten or fifteen learned to *want* to ask 'why' "

"They'll teach others," said the Chief, but dubiously, as if he weren't sure himself.

"Maybe." He finished off his drink and stood up. "But you'll still need to send more teachers, and you'll need to send them for decades, maybe centuries, before the 'trorians even start to question their traditions and institutions."

"Social erosion," sighed the Chief, "takes almost as much time as the geophysical kind."

"There is an alternative," said Cooper, with his hand on the brass doorknob.

"Revolution?" He snorted angrily. "We don't do that kind—"

"No."

"What, then?"

In a voice so soft and tired that it was almost a whisper, Cooper said, "We could always let *them* run the galaxy." Then he was gone.

tanka for the SUNSAT project

Engineers of night:
transmute steel from meteors,
play sun-power *go*,
build rock gardens of mirrors,
teach the lotus to trap light.

–Robert Frazier

IN SPRING A LIVELIER IRIS

by Ruth Berman

art: Hilary Barta


BARTA

Miss Berman—long an enthusiast over both Sherlock Holmes and Oz—recently completed her dissertation on 19th century British fantasy. By way of a holiday, she's started what is either a long story or her first novel, a fantasy, set in 19th century Germany and France. The author lives in Minnesota.

Mother Joyce Varennes took off her stole, kissed the hem, and laid her vestments away. Even that much easing of weight was a relief after three hours of ceremony: mass, supplications for the Church, for all humans, for all beings, adoration, communion. The Death was, in some ways, the climax of the year, touching the heart even more deeply than the Birth or the Rising. And it was exhausting to celebrate, especially, of course, on Zellb.

She had been on Zellb only a month, and she was still having trouble adjusting to the extra weight. And it was tiring to adjust to her congregation, too, about an equal mix of Indians, Chinese, and Zellbs. The Indians and Chinese she expected—making up so large a proportion of humanity as they did, they dominated even what was for them a religion of a small minority. She had not, however, been prepared for the imitative and literal Zellb curiosity. They crossed themselves, they genuflected with one front leg or both (they hadn't decided which version was preferable), and they could not understand why she refused them the sacrament, which she did first on the grounds that they had not made confession, and then (when they flocked to the confessional and confessed to eating forbidden fruits, breaking the Sabbath, lusting after the youth of heathen tribes, and casting the first stone) on the grounds that she could not give them the sacrament without a ruling from her superiors. She wanted to say it was on the grounds of making false confessions, but was afraid of giving offense. Besides, she wasn't sure it was so.

Meanwhile, her immediate duties of the day were complete. And there was only the Saturday night vigil and then Easter itself to get through, and then they would be into the new month intercalated to make the calendar stay even with the year on Zellb, and no saints' days or special days in it. "Thank God," she murmured, and then caught herself, guiltily, and made a mental note to include a sin of sloth in her next transmission home.

It was awkward, not having any other priests around to confess to on Zellb. With its 1.3 Terra-norm gravity, it was particularly rich in temptations to slothfulness. Of course, she could always go talk to Bernie Stein.

She meandered outdoors and started towards the labs along the street of the Terran enclave. Even after a month, the street seemed odd to look at, the smooth and changeable street-fabric of the Zellb roads with Terran-style buildings on each side. And even the buildings made an incongruous mix, for the big ones were mostly tall, rectangular, multi-unit buildings, and the small ones mostly squat fullerdomes such as the church and her rectory beside it.

The day was fair, and the bright yellow sky made her feel her own lack of cheerfulness the more. The streets were a clear rose-pink at the moment, rippled with streaks of silver. That didn't help, either. She felt like a large inkblot in her clerical gown.

Liang Chien rose from the streetbench where he had been resting after the service, and joined her in her walk. "Mother," he said, nodding forward in what was almost a bow.

"Hello, Chien. Any headway?"

"Er . . . mmm." The xenoanthropologist's murmur balanced carefully between hope and resignation, neither one particularly steady.

Joyce put on a sympathetic expression.

Chien sighed. "It's not easy—they're too much interested in studying our mores instead. However, I think I have almost achieved an agreement to exchange questionnaires."

"Including me, I suppose?"

He nodded. "Sorry. Do you mind?"

"Count it up to parochial duties. It's all right."

"Thanks," he said, but without enthusiasm.

"What's wrong, Chien?"

"Oh, nothing much. Celebrating holidays without a family is a little depressing. Don't you find it so?"

Joyce answered noncommittally, "But I do have a family here."

He shook his head impatiently. "That's not the same. I wish I had even one of my forefathers' graves here today."

"That sounds just a little heretically like ancestor worship," she said, trying to provoke a reaction.

"No," he said. "Not exactly," he added a moment later.

It wasn't much of a reaction, but it would have to do. They had reached the entrance to the Social Sciences Building, and Chien's

mood seemed a little easier than it had been. "Well, I mustn't keep you," Joyce said.

"No," Chien agreed, after a pause. He lingered a moment more, then nodded goodby, and went through the door, which slid aside for him and closed by itself.

All Terran doors on Zellb were automatic.

Joyce looked at the blank door. It seemed a pity that Chien did not have a wife, preferably in his own field, to share his worries over Zellb-studies. She began to understand why parish-priests almost invariably got married—at least, she corrected herself, since the Church had resumed the practice of allowing marriage to parsons. In some ways, perhaps, it must be simpler for the members of the monastic orders, vowed not only to chastity but to celibacy.

It occurred to her that just at the moment she needed to get away from the duties of the parish. Yes, a chat with Bernie would be a relief. She continued on down the street, gradually slowing in weariness, until she almost felt ready to drown in the pink street-fabric. She clicked her tongue in annoyance when she realized what she was doing, and forced herself to a brisk march that got her off the cheerful street, into the zoology lab, and up to its bouncer in short order.

The bounce tube gave her a few seconds' blessed weightlessness, and delivered her to the second floor.

She gagged at the smell of preservative. "Bernie, are you still dissecting that toadcow?" she demanded. "I thought you sent in a report on it yesterday?"

"Oh, hi." He swung his stool around and smiled affably. Despite the inevitable exercise involved in existing on Zellb, Bernie had managed to keep a slight paunch. What with the roundness of his belly and face, blue eyes, and a froth of uncombed curly brown hair and beard, he looked like a young Santa Claus. Inappropriate, but unmistakable. "Yeah," he went on, "that was the report to the *Journal of Xenozoology*. Preservative getting to you?"

"Don't you have any sense of smell?"

"Not much." He punched a deodorant button, flooding the air with Brisk Sea Breezes. Actually, it smelled more like a salad oil, but Joyce liked salad anyway.

She lowered herself to the floor and folded up her legs tailor-fashion. "So what's new with the toadcow?"

"It's kosher."

"It's what?"

"Kosher."

"You're not going to tell me it says so in the Talmud."

"Well-l-l . . ." He waved an open hand, setting the objection aside. "Not toadcows specifically. When I'm dissecting a creature I do a religious workup after I get off the scientific one, and most rabbis follow my recommendations." He grinned suddenly. "In fact, maybe I should eat toadcow tonight. Not this specimen," he added at Joyce's involuntary pucker of revulsion. "I think I'm supposed to feast tonight."

"You *think*?"

"There was a Jew on Zellb before I got here, and she worked out an adjusted calendar. I've more or less been using it—doesn't actually mean much, because you're supposed to have a minyan of ten people for most ceremonies, and I happen to be the only one around at present. But I've been going through a lot of of them anyhow, even though it's not strictly . . . ah . . . kosher. And tonight Passover starts, if I can trust her calculations. Like to come for dinner and be the token stranger at my private Seder?" He snorted and shrugged before she could answer. "Probably shouldn't ask that of a priest. Well, anyhow . . . There are about a dozen of us kashering alien animals on various planets. It's fairly important, because colonies want to use native food when they can. Of course, some of the Orthodox rabbis don't trust mere Reform types like me, and the Chassids mostly think all off-world edibles are tref. Can't please everybody."

"All right, what makes the toadcow kosher—and I thought you didn't keep kosher."

"I do when I feel like it—which for some reason's been fairly often on Zellb. As for this creature, well, it has cloven hoofs, and I think you have to call this stuff hair on its hide. It doesn't chew what you'd technically call a cud, but it excretes cellulose through the mouth, and it cleans its teeth by chewing on that a while before spitting it out, and I say it's a cud. Besides, how many alien beasts you can eat do you find that tasty?"

"The Talmud says it should taste good?"

"Doesn't say it shouldn't." Bernie lowered himself off the stool and stretched out on his side on a rest-pad, currently orange. "And what's new with you, Mother?"

"Nothing much. Some of the natives showed up at Mass today still wanting to be converted."

"Well, why don't you? Christians do seek converts, right?—you don't keep it to the Chosen People?"

"Oh, in a way we do. God sent a human to save humans, and the Church presumes He would take care of other peoples individually—if they need it."

"Oh?" said Bernie. "And which races would you say don't need it?"

"As a fallen species, we're officially not qualified to hold an opinion," she said primly. "Although if you're interested, the Zellbs are tentatively in the tentative list of unfallen species."

"Are they really?" Bernie mused. "Well, I suppose it's no freakier than kashering a toadcow. And how do you tell an unfallen species?"

"No war, no religion, general trustworthiness and truthfulness. Although I think they've been giving me false confessions in their curiosity to find out what a religion is like. I've been thinking of recommending re-classification to—" She broke off. Bernie's mouth and eyebrows were twisted down and up, respectively, in bemused amusement. "Something?" she asked.

"No religion is a sign of grace?"

"No organized religion. Presumed not needful for those in a state of true innocence."

"Oh. All right, but doesn't it make them even more irritating than they are already to consider them superior beings?"

"Yes!" she said. The intensity of her answer startled her. She was silent a moment. "Yes," she added thoughtfully, "it does, but I hadn't realized it." Continued discussion of the irritating qualities of the Zellbs would probably be unwise, and certainly uncharitable. "Maybe it won't feel as annoying now that I know why it is," she said by way of closing the topic. Possibly it was even true.

Bernie raised himself slightly on one elbow, gave up the effort, lowered himself again, and looked quizzically at Joyce. "Sounds as if you're about to get the chance to test the hypothesis."

Joyce cupped an ear towards the bounce tube and listened. She heard a clicking of human shoes and the soft plopping noise of Zellb paws trotting towards the bouncer. "Ummf."

A moment later Chien popped out, and with him was his more-or-less alien equivalent, Scholar Clearstep (or so he said it translated), looking relatively quiet, with his left hind projector casting a turquoise falling-water pattern which spilled over at the edge on to Joyce's face. She moved out of the light.

"My apologies," murmured Clearstep, and adjusted the projector unit on his left shoulder so that what it projected towards the

back fell only on his silver torso-tunic and body-drapery. The other hind projection was the same pattern in grey, and the front of the tunic was lit from both sides with a motionless sine-wave pattern in paler turquoise. It was a stolid, even stuffy get-up for a Zellb. Presumably he had come to pay a formal call, probably wanting to make a request of some sort.

Joyce got to her feet, trying, not very successfully, to move as smoothly as a Zellb would over a matter of importance. "Clearstep," she said. "Liang Chien."

"Mother Joyce Varennes. Bernard Stein. You are well," he said in Zellb, and the translator he was wearing around his neck echoed it in Standard Terran.

"Yes," they both answered. Bernie, reluctantly, stood up, too, as the caller had included him.

Clearstep promptly sank down on his haunches, and folded his arms across his torso, and the three humans sat down, Chien beside him, the other two facing them. "Much better," Clearstep remarked approvingly. "I think what you call a squat would be closer, but it is, I understand, not a fully stable position of repose for you."

"That's right," said Joyce, and brought him back to business saying, "may we serve you?"

"If it please you. Spring approaches. On your local-planet-adjusted calendars, today is Good Friday, and tonight is the Paschal feast. That is correct?"

Joyce nodded. For a moment she tried to figure out when Good Friday would be occurring that year on Terra, but the arithmetic was too complicated, and she made herself give it up and pay attention to the Zellb.

"Would you jointly present for a group of our Scholars a Good Friday mass and a Seder this evening? The motifs of death and rebirth are most ingenious, and we believe the inherent symbolism will appear more significantly in juxtaposition."

Joyce did not dare look at Bernie. They would either both start laughing or else exchange a look of dismay so obvious as to be rude by their own standards, if not necessarily by Clearstep's. Instead she turned a quick look of reproachful you-knew-what-was-up? at Chien, which he answered no with a shake of the head. She then turned her attention properly to Clearstep, sitting quietly, all four legs tucked neatly against the body.

Even though she was sitting down, her own legs ached. And that, she realized, was her out. "Scholar Clearstep, I'm honored by

your request. I'm not sure if it is something I should do without consulting my superiors, but I cannot do it in any case. The ceremony is long, and I am a weak human. I have performed it once today, and I am weary. Could I meet with the Scholars next week some time and discuss Good Friday with them, instead?"

"I do not know," said Clearstep. "Discussion is less than enactment. I shall inquire." His great yellow eyes—olive in the light reflected from his projectors—turned to Bernie. "We have imported the traditional menu for you in sufficient quantity."

Bernie could not shove off responsibility on his superiors. That was the disadvantage of a non-hierarchical religion. And for the same reason he could not claim a layman's lack of authority; any Jew could lead a Jewish ceremony. Bernie was stuck with it.

He rubbed one finger across his lips and down through his beard. "Why not?" he said at last. "Yes, if you like."

"I shall call for you at sunset," said Clearstep, who made a two-legged kneel towards Bernie, then turned and trotted serenely into the bounce tube.

Joyce and Chien lingered, both looking and both feeling awkward. "I, ah, hope this isn't imposing on you too impossibly much," said Chien. "I didn't realize just what the Scholars had in mind when they offered me an exchange of ceremonial observation and participation. I thought they'd send one representative to the enclave. . . ." He trailed off.

"Instead of bringing the mountain to Mahomet?" suggested Bernie. "Oh, it doesn't matter. No real problem. But I suppose I should sit down and study the Siddur through so I can answer questions. I guess I can stand an imported meal, even if it is probably pulverized and reconsituted lamb."

"We'd better let you get started, then," said Joyce.

He nodded silently, and the other two humans in their turn dropped Alice-like down the bounce tube.

Outside the temperature was cooler, although it was still an hour or so to sunset, and the streets had changed to a pattern of ochre with a gridwork of gold. The work-day was over for most of the enclave's inhabitants, and tired humans were trudging or biking from labs and offices to homes. Joyce started back to the rectory, Chien accompanying her as far as the Social Sciences Building.

"Will you be at the Seder?" Joyce asked him.

"No, I wasn't asked. Perhaps you'd like to have dinner with me."

She glanced sideways at him, the wide, calm face with its sharp, northern cheekbones, and skin almost the color of the street on which they walked. If the street had been some other color that hour, the suggestion perhaps would not have seemed so incongruous. "Thanks, but no. I need to prepare for the vigil and Easter."

The doorway opened for Chien, leading to those leftover bits of work he could not bring himself to leave over the weekend.

Joyce started to go on, but he put a hand on her sleeve to keep her a moment. "Yes, my son?" she said formally.

He rocked back. "Nothing, Mother. Goodby."

Joyce frowned to herself as he left. Chien was still depressed and lonely. It was a pity she did not find him physically attractive. Almost, perhaps, it was bigoted of her not to. But . . . before she could carry her reflections any further, she was struck by an attack of desire—if that was the right word for a sensation so impersonal and undirected. Spiritually, these attacks did not worry her. They were normal to the human animal. Physically, if not a damned nuisance, they were at any rate a decided nuisance, a feeling so intense as to amount to sharp pain. It was hard to identify the sensation as one naturally intended to be eased by pleasure. It felt much more like illness.

Joyce clenched her fists so that fingernails against palms would be a counter-irritant to distract her and continued along the street.

By the time she reached the rectory the attack had passed. Between that and the work of the afternoon, she was both hungry and sleepy. After a few moment's dithering between the two haystacks of food and a nap, she decided on the latter, told her clock to wake her in an hour, knelt down briefly to pray, then dropped on to the bed and over the edge of sleep in almost the same moment.

It was an uneasy sleep. Most of the nightmares slipped away when she woke and would not let the conscious mind keep hold of them, but the last of them stayed with her.

She dreamed it was Good Friday, and she was a small shopkeeper with a store on the Via Dolorosa, angry at the disruption of business caused by all the Zellbs crowding her doorstep to see Christ walk by with His cross. He came at last, dusty and bleeding, and tried to sit down among the Zellbs, blocking the doorway entirely with Himself and the cross. It was too much. "Get out of here," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

"I'll go," said Bernie, "but you shall wait until I return."

"Get up," said the clock, "get up, please. Get up. Get up, please."

"Yes, yes, I'm awake," she told it hastily, and sat up, still bemused by the guilt she was feeling in her dream-role as the Wandering Jew. Because it was in fact Good Friday, it took her some time to shake the conviction that it was Good Friday—the original. She sat for some time in the dark, hungry and afraid to tell the light to go on.

At last she shook herself and said, "Light," and set about preparing her fast-meal. It was not enough to satisfy her, but it wasn't supposed to be: a soup from a local bean-like plant, a small yeastroast, and a single glass of water. She thought wistfully of what it would be like to be eating a Paschal lamb, instead, with herbs, vegetables, wine, and sweets. And, of course, dry crackers. She took a slice of fresh bread, thinking that there were pleasures in even a Lenten diet, after all. She wondered if anything in the imported feast Bernie was getting was fit to eat.

This reflection brought back the nightmare.

She tried to forget about it. It came of being too much alone after a hard day's work. Perhaps it was a pity she had not gone to the strange mixture of Good Friday and Passover after all. It would at least have been entertaining—for what, she asked herself, could you get out of such a combination of unlikes. She had meant to continue this line of meditation/reverie by thinking of the better correspondence of Easter and Passover (as one rebirth of the year to another), when some other section of herself completed the calculation and told her what you get when you combine Good Friday and Passover. A crucifixion.

No, she argued, that couldn't be right, because on those terms Passover should come first, on Good Friday eve, so to speak. It was simply the nightmare running in her mind, and, besides, the Zellb Scholars would not be so literal about study-through-reenactment, would they? Or would they?

Feeling uneasy all the way, she went in back of the Rectory and took out the bicycle she had given up for Lent, then set off on the golden road—the gridwork pattern had begun to shine now that it was dark, and lit the way.

It was a little chilly, now that the sun was down, but the exercise quickly warmed her. It was hard to make her tired legs keep pedaling. If only she had a groundcar. But groundcars were too expensive to bother with in a small area. The enclave owned two

trucks for hauling, also a plane. The plane would not help. A truck might, but she hadn't driven them herself. Allowing for the loss of time to get one out and persuade someone to come along and drive, it was as fast to bike. It was also less conspicuous—and she would look enough of a fool, bursting in no doubt as Bernie opened the door for Elijah.

But the Hall of Scholars was empty. It was lit up, walls glowing clear blue with gold and purple floral patterns, and inside the tables were rumbling away as they washed dishes, but no people were there.

Joyce stared at the emptiness and prayed for guidance, which was not forthcoming. She shrugged, wheeled her bike through the Hall auditorium, and out the back door. The Zellb doors were not automatic; she managed to get them shoved open, and left them that way.

The Hall was set at the foot of a slope, and behind it rose a park (so Chien thought—it could have been a garden or a place of ritual, or possibly even, he said, a cemetery). And on the hill Joyce found the missing Scholars.

The slope was lit dimly with the small lights of many projectors, shining on some dozens of Zellbs, each wearing an individual pattern or combination of patterns. They flickered like fireflies gone mad in a meadow.

The lights were not spread quite evenly up the slope. There was a dim aisle running up the center, where no Zellbs were standing, lit only by spill-over and reflection from the projectors. The crown of the hill was empty and almost completely dark. For a moment Joyce thought she could just make out a cross at the top of the hill.

Then from halfway up the slope she heard a thud of something being dropped, and Bernie's voice, shrill almost out of recognition. "You're all crazy. I'm not going up there."

The Zellbs began arguing with each other. Joyce knew little of the language and could not follow how they were interpreting Bernie's unwillingness to bear his cross. She felt tears starting to her eyes. If only she had a weapon. Although what weapon would allow her to overpower a hillful of large Zellb Scholars before being overpowered herself, she did not know. The galling thought was that, as the Zellbs were not used to warfare or fighting, perhaps any weapon would have done.

And with that thought, she turned around, summoned up one of the commonest Zellb phrases in her mind, and carefully told the

Hall in Zellb, "Light up full."

It blazed white, lighting the whole hill. "Stop!" she cried. "Don't move. The first to move dies." This was a shameless crib from ancient movies, but effective, as soon as the Scholars wearing translators had spread it to the rest.

"Mother Joyce Varennes," said Clearstep, calling down from near the top of the hill to acknowledge her presence. "Are we enacting the ceremony incorrectly?"

"You are planning to kill Bernard Stein," Joyce said, to be quite sure. She started up the hill, wheeling the bike along.

"His body," said Clearstep. "You are aware of the immortality of the soul, I believe."

At the moment, Joyce was not aware of it. She believed in nothing religious: not souls, nor heaven, nor God. She assumed that would pass and answered from the conviction she did not feel, "Nevertheless, our religion forbids murder."

"And the first of us who moves is to die?" That was another of the Scholars, resplendent in a flowing stream of scarlet and amethyst, with a high voice ironic even in the translated repetition.

"Only to prevent death," Joyce said, still moving forward.

"Your argument does not follow from your premises," objected Clearstep. "I do not follow how your religion can taboo death if you see that it is illusory."

"There are several theological explanations of that point," said Joyce agreeably. "Perhaps we can discuss them some time." Now she was within a few meters of Bernie. She could see his face, pale in the white light from the Hall. He stood up, shakily. He wore the crown of thorns, but he was not bound. "Light off!" Joyce screamed at the Hall.

It went black, and, by contrast, even with the lights from the personal projectors still glowing on the hill, it was impossible to see anything. "Bernie!" she whispered desperately. She felt the bicycle lurch as he bumped into it and sat down heavily on the back fender. She stood on one pedal, and Bernie put his arms around her waist and locked his hands together.

Joyce pushed off down the hill. How she managed to steer through the back door, across the Hall, and out the front without hitting walls or furniture or losing her balance, she never knew. Somewhere between door and door she got herself seated and both feet on the pedals, and by the time she was out the front door she was pedaling, too frightened to be tired.

Then the Scholars were chasing after them, the hill giving out a dull throbbing under the beat of their paws, but the adrenaline-powered bicycle was faster. As she neared the Terran enclave, the Zellbs dropped back, accepting the loss, but she kept on pedalling until she had reached the rectory. The door opened itself for her, and she coasted in, trying to brake. But at last her muscles failed her, and she smashed into the wall of the dome, spilling herself, bike, and Bernie.

The bike fell on top of her. Bernie rolled clear and lay still. Joyce shoved the bike off and left it on the floor, wheels spinning. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Bernie sat up slowly, felt for his crown of thorns, and pried it off. It was apparently not made of real thorns—underneath it were bruises, not cuts. Bernie felt these tenderly, and answered, "Not very. I guess so. Yes." He then burst into tears.

Joyce stood up carefully and poured out two glasses of water. Wine would have been better, but the heavy sweet wine used in the sacraments would probably unsettle their stomachs before it could settle their nerves. She had a stock of better wines, and of beer, but it had all been put away until after Lent, and she did not feel up to finding a bottle and coping with a corkseal. She drank one glass of water, then held the other in front of Bernie's face until his attention was drawn to it.

By the time he had finished drinking it, he had stopped crying, and he snuffled his nose clear. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She sat down on the floor next to him. "The Church's guess is wrong—they're fallen."

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "They believed you when you said you'd kill them. Are you sure the ones who confess to you tell lies?"

"Dunno. Depends on what they think they mean by the terms they're using, maybe. All the same, it's damned poor odds."

His eyes widened at the curse, but he said only, "What is?"

"The proportion. You'd think if God's really more powerful than the Devil there'd be more innocent races, instead of nearly all of us so obviously sinful. It doesn't speak well for His craftsmanship."

"Felix culpa, my dear."

Joyce shook her head. " 'Fortunate sin' is a cure, not an explanation."

"Well . . . you can't disprove your own religion just by statistics."

"No, but it makes you doubt."

"You do that anyway," he said.

"Yes, I suppose."

Bernie looked at her, then climbed slowly to his feet. "I'd better go."

Joyce stood up, too, and kissed him goodby. But the kiss, beginning in relief and gratitude, turned almost at once into passion, their tongues touching as well as their lips.

Desire promptly hit Joyce again. She pulled away and dropped into the chair by her desk, clenched fists pushing down against the chair-arms. Bernie watched her for a few moments, then sat down in the other chair, where people consulting her were supposed to sit.

"Joyce, have you ever thought of marrying me?"

"Don't be silly," she snapped. "We couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"I'd want to have children. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes, but . . . Oh. Yes." Bernie paused, considering. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to let these hypothetical youngsters be raised Jewish because statistically there're so few of us?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't. The Church would never permit it." She looked at him. In the dimness of the room's nightlight his eyes looked grey more than blue. His beard would be soft to the touch. The hard, impersonal itching had stopped, and it felt good to sit still and look at Bernie. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to bring them up in *both* religions, would you?" she said, after a little while.

"And let them choose?" he said. "Pointless. They'd just grow up confused."

"We do that anyway."

"Yes." He thought for a moment. "Might be worth trying." He stood up and started towards the door, but he was still weak, and he had to steady himself by leaning one hand against the wall.

"That won't do," said Joyce. "You'd better stay here tonight."

He looked at her, startled, not sure how much the invitation included.

She shook her head slightly.

He grinned, eyed the distance around the wall to the door, and shrugged. "Thanks." He walked the few steps to the bed quickly, before his knees could give way, and lay down on his side, curling his arms in and his legs up protectively.

Joyce sat down again, told the nightlight to go off, and leaned

back in her chair. It would do to sleep in for one night, although she would be stiff in the morning. Liang Chien's efforts to study the Zellbs would be set back by the annoyance the Scholars would be feeling. Well, that was his problem to deal with, and perhaps it would help to distract him from his loneliness. It would be her problem to try to help him cope with that loneliness. He would be hurt if she married Bernie. But all these matters could wait. First they must sleep, and celebrate the spring.

ANSWER TO THE ERASING OF PHILBERT THE FUDGER
(from page 47)

Philbert reasoned as follows:

"Suppose my erasure day is Saturday. No one will tell me Friday morning that Saturday is the day, therefore on Friday afternoon I will *know for certain* that the day is Saturday. But the judge told me I would *not* know the day until the morning of the day itself. Therefore I *can't* be erased on Saturday without making the judge a liar.

"Consider Friday. It too is ruled out. Since Saturday cannot possibly be the day I stick my head in the oblivion box, if I'm not told the day by Thursday noon, I will know that the day is Friday. Why? Because only Friday and Saturday remain. It can't be Saturday, hence it must be Friday. But if I know on Thursday that it is Friday, the judge again will have uttered a falsehood.

"So Friday and Saturday are out. Consider Thursday. It too is eliminated by the same reasoning! After twelve o'clock on Wednesday, if I've not been told the day, I will know it is Thursday because it can't be Friday or Saturday. The same reasoning applies to Wednesday, Tuesday, and Monday. No matter what day is picked, I'll know the date by the afternoon of the previous day. In each case it will make the judge a liar and allow me a new trial."

Philbert's reasoning seems impeccable, yet there is a fatal flaw in his logic. It is not so easy to pinpoint exactly where the flaw lies, but it *is* easy to prove that Philbert's reasoning can't be correct. How? Turn to page 119 for the answer.

FROM THE LUNATECH ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE

by Sharon N. Farber

art: Freff

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LUNATECH. THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICK AND CHIRURGERY

Dr. Victor von Frankenstein	Dean
Dr. Ole Methuselah, S.O.L.	Admissions Officer
Dr. Clark Savage, Jr.	Financial Aids Officer

General Information

The College of Physick and Chirurgery was founded in 1837 by Baron Victor von Frankenstein, for "Persons of like mind who have been most foully Persecuted by the common Universities of the Continent." For over five centuries the cream of Terra's Mad Doctors have graduated from the College of Physick and Chirurgery. In 1875 it was incorporated into The Lunar Institute of Technology. Lunatech's is the only medical college in the Solar System to be accredited by the Galactic Association of Medical Schools (GAMS).

In order to meet the exponentially growing demand for Mad Doctors, Lunatech must educate more students than it can accommodate. Wishing not to lose its acclaimed student-faculty ratio, the College has embarked on an ambitious program of temporal rather than physical expansion: new entering classes are distributed into the past and the future. Certain departments, such as the Schools of Epidemiology and Paradoxicology, have relocated permanently to specific eras. Chronic travel is made possible through time-sharing at the Lunatech Commuter Center.

The College is located in the Dr. Fell Medical Center, in Lunatech's crater campus on the scenic, near side of Terra's Moon. Medical center buildings include the Praetorius Clinical Sciences Building; the Monk Mayfair Chemical Research Laboratories; the Burke and Hare Memorial Dissection Amphitheatre; the Hans Zarkov Rocket Ambulance Facility; the Caligari Clinic for the Treatment of Somnambulism; the Van Helsing Haematophagia Research Institute, Bloodbank, and Restaurant; the Dr. Cyclops Weight Reduction Clinic; the Sivana Student Union (with the famous Moreau salt-water swimming pool); and the architectural-award-winning Vitus Werdegast Asylum for the Sane, designed by Hjalmar Poelzig. Limited housing is available in the Dr. Terwilliker Graduate Student Residence Hall. The College is within teleportation and transporter range of the cultural centers of the Inner Planets. The College's location at a confluence of the time streams makes available a variety of sports for the adventurous-minded.

Curriculum

Two paths are available, the two-quarter (20 week) program leading to an M.D. degree, and the two-quarter, no Christmas vacation (24 week) M.D.–Ph.D. program. The basic medical sciences are taught in the first quarter, along with an introduction to patient care. At the end of the preclinical quarter, the science section of the American National Medical Boards will be given, as well as the more rigorous GAMS examination. The second quarter consists of elective classes and rotating clerkships in the various services. Clinical instruction is provided at the medical center and at affiliated institutions including Venus Community, St. Swithin's, Martian General, and Transylvanian Cottage hospitals.

Classes are graded on a basis of honors, pass, fail, and disintegration.

Requirements for Entrance

Because of the importance of selecting those chosen few who will serve their home planets as Mad Doctors, a stringent body of eclectic course work is required. Applicants need not have majored in mad science, but are expected to have completed at least one year (9 semester hours) each of inorganic, organic, and psychical chemistry; alchemy; physics; astrophysics; metaphysics; xenobiology; teratology; and the calculus. Experience in genetic and incivil engineering, parapsychology, forensic inventing, creating life in a test tube (or larger receptacle), robotics, and time travel are heavily recommended, as are a minimum of one year of inhumanities, antisociology, alien and/or dead languages, and future history. However, the College has in the past admitted applicants with none of these requirements fulfilled, usually due to nepotism. Applicants are expected to have been sent down from at least one major university as a result of advanced ideas, forbidden experiments, or unsociable habits.

Applications are no longer accepted from persons under the age of five or over the age of two consecutive centuries, except in the case of Time Lords, Nosferati, and Princes of Amber. Revivified individuals are eligible if they were not more than 199 years old at death. Applications from clones of faculty members will not be processed. Admission is otherwise possible, if not probable, for all qualified applicants regardless of religion, politics, race, sex, species, undeath, or mutation. Solar System residents receive the first consideration, but a small number of spaces are available for non-residents. Special preferential consideration is accorded, under a

reciprocity treaty, to graduates of Lunatech's sister schools: Miskatonic University, Kandor City College, Mu Normal School, Transylvanian Academy of Arts and Sciences, City of Dis Community College, Super Hero Institute of Technology, and Alternate University.

Selection Factors

In the October 1907 entering class there were 17 men, 5 women, and 12 whatevers; 30 were Solar System residents and 3 were not. One declined to state his planet of origin. There were two androids, one golem, one Neptunian pariah, one Medusa, and one Vampire-American in the class. All applicants had a mean G.P.A. of 4.1. Accepted applicants had a mean G.P.A. of π. Final selection is purely on the basis of the admission committee's whim. Bribes and threats are discouraged.

Second quarter transfer students are accepted only from Lunatech's counterpart in alternate universes.

Financial Aid

Due to the inflationary state of the expanding galactic economy, financial aid is no longer available except in extraordinary circumstances. Students needing funds are urged to make their own. Limited access to the undergraduate chemurgical laboratories is granted to students wishing to turn lead into gold, or vice versa. Those intending to gain funds through crime may hire lackeys and thugs at reasonable hourly rates through the University's Community Outreach Program.

Information for Minorities

There is a special effort to enroll qualified students of species traditionally under-represented in mad medicine. However, due to practical considerations, the College of Physick and Chirurgery refuses to admit individuals whose biology does not meet minimum standards for performance in a 20% oxygen atmosphere, or whose diet has in the past included relatives or members of the Committee on Admission.

Now accepting applications for the March 2032 and September 1665 classes.

FURLOUGH

by Skip Wall

art: Val Lakey

The author offers that his mind is "perceptive but warped," and that his life contains a dog (described as rather dense), two cats (smart but useless), a garage containing a telescope, games, and books (car, if any, not mentioned), and a wife Stephanie, and a small son, Jason. He was tempted, he says, to invent a more colorful career in the French Foreign Legion and hoof-and-mouth disease research, but was convinced that not all *authors are like that. "Furlough" is his first sale.*

Assault Sergeant Charles Xavier Dawson stood on the old highway watching the farmhouse on the wide, gray river, about a half a kilometer from where he stood. He was very still, the way people sometimes are when mesmerized by inner questions and conflicts.

You're a damned fool, Dawson. I've seen it before. You'll get nothing out of it but bitterness and disappointment. Not to mention the fact that you could draw a General Court for doing it if anybody up the chain of command finds out. But I know you'll go, whether I give you your leave chit or not. They always do. Here. You've got forty-eight hours. I just hate to see a good man screw himself up, that's all.

The fields between Dawson and the house lay damp and heavy, filling a bend in the Willamette. The rich white and slate afternoon sky cast a light drizzle, but the Soldier didn't mind. He had endured much harsher conditions without complaint. The crumbled pavement and a nearby highway sign, its arrowed message nearly obscured by rust, spoke of the neglect even a faraway war can visit on everyday surroundings. But there were few vehicles, so the deterioration of Highway 99 had little practical impact.

This part of North America was sparsely populated, he had read, since it had little in the way of defense industries or war resources. Oregon, they called it, after some defunct political subdivision. It was very quiet. Groups of tall fir trees stood, gray-green in the distance, silent benevolent sentries watching over some misty secret held close in the thickets below. The fence by the road grew out of a thick, bushy layer of emerald green grass; the posts had collected moss. The field beyond had been harvested already. The detritus

and rich loam lay resigned, waiting for winter. Everything here had been ignored by the great events of the last century, left a hundred years behind, it seemed. Even from a distance, the farm buildings around the house had an air of damp, peaceful shabbiness.

He had been standing by the gate for some time, considering turning around and walking the six kilometers back to the tram station in Corvallis. It was unreasonable to feel any kinship for this place, he knew, but the unfamiliar equanimity of this silent country was strange and disappointing. Still, he had come too far to turn away now.

A few children had passed him earlier as he walked, on their way home from school. Their yellow raincoats glistened brightly with dew as they skipped and laughed. When they noticed him they quieted suddenly, and passed by on the opposite side of the road, a little quick parade of fear and curiosity. He didn't smile at them, for he knew it would do no good. Soldiers were rarely seen in Oregon, he guessed, and then only on the tramways and at the regional terminal in Portland. But the fear was still there, the hostility and the jealousy and the anger, even in Oregon. His size and his massive, lithe strength marked him irrevocably even if he should shed his uniform, which he could never do.

Dawson wished someone from the Regiment were here, even if they just waited for him out here on the highway. Kascinski, or Ford maybe. They would have no comforting words, but the presence of their massive bodies, the steady gazes, the reminder of countless hours spent together since they were children, in play yards and training and mud and falling through the purple skies of enemy worlds and bloody terror under M'techna barrages, the faint smell of camphor from the little-used Dress Bravo travelling uniforms, Ford's cold, chewed-to-death cigars, Kascinski's broad, ancient childhood scar never matched in combat . . . Dawson could draw strength from these familiar things. But they weren't here, of course; not even his own shadow was here to accompany him. He shook his head a little, and reached forward to open the gate.

As he walked along the oiled gravel drive toward the house, the drizzle became more persistent. Tiny delicate circles grew and died in dark puddles collected in the ruts. Segments of his dark, field-gray form were reflected back from the small irregular mirrors as he passed over them, his head bowed. The crunch of his massive, shining dress boots was an unwelcome intrusion in the hush of the mist and rain. It was like a signal to turn around, to go back where he belonged, back to the hoarse laughter and feminine giggles to

be had at the Aranar center for the next precious days before they tramped back into the transports, back to those cold, alien worlds where war crumped and rumbled endlessly. But something pushed him on toward the house, something that doggedly ignored the growing apprehenion.

Soon, too soon, wooden steps and a porch appeared at the upper edge of his vision. Again he stopped, droplets falling one by one from the bill of his cap. Beyond the house the Willamette burbled, swollen with the runoff of fall rain, roiling slowly around dead, sopping branches. He stepped carefully on the steps and porch, knowing his three-hundred-fifty-pound frame could easily damage the old wood. He tapped lightly on the freshly painted white door, and the curtains jiggled ever so slightly with the touch of his knuckles, as if afraid. Perhaps no one was home; there was no answering step inside. But no, he had seen the little electric truck parked in the shed beside the house. In the corner of his eye, a window curtain shifted in secret. No one but a Soldier, senses honed by years of training and combat, would have noticed.

No other movement. They might not open the door for him, and he would not have been surprised. They were late middle-aged and alone, nearly a mile from their closest neighbor. An apparition, a looming giant had suddenly appeared; a form seen only in the safe confinement of the trivee, fighting dozens of light-years away, was now made incomprehensibly real, on their porch, in the late afternoon rain.

Still he stood, silent and insistent, cap in hand now, trying to look harmless. A useless endeavor, he knew. After a time, the door was opened fully, almost defiantly, by a white-haired, steady man in his late fifties. A strong face stared up at him. No peeping out from behind a cracked door for this one. A high forehead and intelligent gray eyes asked the obvious question. *Well, what do you want?*

"Mr. Sanderson?"

A curt nod in reply. From the darkness behind Sanderson a small, indistinct woman sat, watching warily.

"I'm Sergeant Charles Dawson."

Sanderson waited, unconvinced that Dawson had any business there.

"I knew your son."

The woman stood and approached the door, still behind her husband.

"You knew Jamie?" she said, her hand on the man's shoulder.

"I was on a transport with him. He was a Comm Tech with the

Flag Staff we had aboard. Normally we don't mix much with the norms . . . with the transport crews I mean, but we were the only two who played chess, the old kind."

"He always loved the game," she said, "Fred taught him when he was a boy."

The woman had a round, pleasant face, with a halo of curls cut close to the head in the current style. She was less gray than her husband, and looked used to smiling.

Dawson's water-repellant greatcoat had carried its own little rainstorm onto the porch, and a constellation of little puddles grew around his feet. Mrs. Sanderson looked as if she wanted to ask him in, but her husband was unsure. Finally, the older man spoke, noncommittal and distant, as if Dawson had come to fix the sink.

"Well, come on in then."

Dawson took off his coat and shook the remaining water off while wiping his feet carefully on the mat, feeling suddenly very awkward. He ducked under the door and stood, grateful that the ceiling was high enough for him to stand. He did not want to accentuate his size; this business would be difficult enough as it was.

"I'll take that." Sanderson took the coat into another room, leaving his wife with Dawson. She was obviously anxious to hear more about her son. She invited Dawson to sit, and he carefully lowered himself into the strongest-looking chair, carrying some of his weight on his feet.

"We received word that Jamie had been killed only three months ago, even though he died late last year. Fred took it hard. He and Jamie were very close, you know, even for father and son." She spoke quietly, as if she didn't want her husband to overhear, as if the pain might still be too much.

"Yes ma'am, I know. Techfive Sanderson . . . Jamie spoke of both of you often." She was pleased at that. Mr. Sanderson came into the room and sat stiffly, unwilling to relax enough to make Dawson feel welcome. His hostility toward Dawson showed in the whiteness of his knuckles on the arms of his chair. As if to move the visit along and get it over with, Sanderson spoke.

"Was Jamie a good sailor? We got a letter from his division officer that spoke well of him."

"Well, Mr. Sanderson, I never really saw him on duty; we weren't allowed in the command centers on the transports. Security and so on. But he always struck me as if he knew what he was doing. Very military."

For a norm, that is.

"How long did you know Jamie?" It was Mrs. Sanderson this time, trying to compensate for her husband's coldness.

"A little more than a year. We were on the *Cincinnati* together during the Athoquanick Campaign and the Candeopea landings, when I wasn't groundside, that is."

"Candeopea was where he . . . died, they said."

Dawson nodded. Jamie Sanderson and hundreds of others had died horrible deaths. The *Cincinnati's* forward shields had dropped only for a moment because of a power failure. A M'techna torp had slipped in, a chance-in-a-thousand shot, and had detonated a hundred meters from the bow. A low yield, high radiation burst had bathed everyone on the bridge in a shower of neutrons. There was visible damage as well; Techfive Sanderson had received third degree burns over sixty percent of his body. He had held on long enough to suffer from both the burns and the radiation. Dawson had visited him in sickbay on the *Roma.* Sanderson had been a doped up, charred mess. There was little the Meds could do with him; with any of them. Jamie had never spoken, but Dawson was sure he had recognized him.

"The *Cincinnati* was hit by a chance shot, a torpedo. Jamie and the bridge crew were killed instantly. He died at his post, and didn't feel a thing."

The parents nodded. Mrs. Sanderson's face was frozen in the distant half-smile some people use to control grief.

"The reason I came to see you," he lied again, "is, well, the war is so big, sometimes it takes a long time for personal effects to get back. Years even. I managed to get these for you because I knew we were coming earthside for Aranar." He reached inside his blouse and pulled out a wallet and a wrist chrono, toylike in his huge hand. Carefully, he handed them to Mrs. Sanderson, who took them, eyes large and grateful.

"Oh, thank you," she said. Even Mr. Sanderson looked at him as if he were a human being now. She opened the wallet and looked at the cards, the photos, a couple of letters she had written herself. She paused. That would be the picture of him and Jamie playing chess in the norm crews' mess, a group of norms gathered around Dawson's great frame. An unusual picture. Soldiers and norms didn't often mix.

"You, ahhh, you and Jamie must have been pretty close for you to come all this way to give us these," said Mr. Sanderson.

Not yet. In a little while, but not yet.

Dawson's jaw knotted. He nodded once, simply.

"Sergeant," said the woman, who needed to do something to keep from breaking down, "would you like some tea? It's just the imitation kind, but we have some real sugar."

"Yes," he said, glad for the chance to collect himself, "yes, thank you."

When she left the room, Sanderson began to look uncomfortable again. Dawson began to pass the brief, tense span of time by looking around the little living room. Every detail was immaculate. The hardwood floor was waxed and polished, the cream colored walls were freshly painted. The furniture was old, but comfortable and well cared for. It was as if the dampness outside was held back by some invisible field of tidiness. On the mantel above the fireplace (an odd thing to have in a room, thought Dawson, but then, a house is not a Regimental Barracks) were framed photos of the small family and a holocube of Jamie and his father. It had been taken in front of the house. Jamie looked about twelve, standing with his arm around Sanderson's waist, grinning, while the man had his hand on Jamie's shoulder. He too was smiling, but there was a darkness around his eyes which spoke of some inner loss. The two of them looked very close.

The Regiment's the only family you'll ever have, Dawson. We raised you from an infant, and we made you everything you are. We're your brothers and sisters, more than any norm can be, and you'll live and die with us. There's no other way. The norms can never accept us, Dawson; they don't have to. A hundred years after the war's over, there won't be a single one of us left. They've seen to that. You know what they call us when they think we can't hear. Muleface. Numbnuts. The only kin you'll ever see is in the Regimental nursery.

"I did my twelve years with the Regional Upper Atmosphere Defense Command up in Spokane." Sanderson was trying to ease back into conversation. "'Course, you've pushed them back so far now that they don't see much action at RUAD any more. A raid every once in a while, I hear, but nothing like the old days."

Another uncomfortable silence. An unspoken barrier hung between them. Everyone did their part, of course. A man puts in his twelve years, and that's it. But a Soldier, well, a Soldier's a Soldier, born and bred to fight, forever if need be. Sanderson tried again, honestly grateful to Dawson for bringing his son's belongings.

"They say it could be over in a few . . . years." He trailed off, sorry he had said it, for it led inexorably to the question on so many minds. *And then what do we do with you, with thirty-five million overgrown trained killers? Where do we send the Regiments then?*

Dawson changed the subject. He wanted to show them he wasn't so different, or what he wanted to do would be impossible.

"Have you had the farm for long, Mr. Sanderson?"

"Since just before the war. Margaret did wonders with it while I was gone. Even when she was carrying Jamie, and the other . . . she's quite a woman. I don't know what I would have done without her these last few months. Jamie was my only son, you know."

"Mmmmh." Dawson stared hard at the patterns on the oriental rug beneath his feet, and swallowed.

Soon, Mrs. Sanderson came back with the tea. Dawson was glad for the diversion, the pouring of the tea, handing out the napkins, how many sugars did he want, and be careful it was hot. He held the china cup carefully, acutely aware that his index finger would not fit through the graceful handle.

They sipped the tea and talked for a time, Mrs. Sanderson taking the lead. What Regiment was he with? How often did they send his unit back for rest? Had he ever been to Oregon before, no of course not, how silly of her. Not many people came here nowadays. Dawson asked if it always rained this much, and if it was always so quiet here. After a while, the conversation became almost comfortable. Dawson decided that the couple was lonely, especially knowing that Jamie was never coming home. It was getting dark outside, and Sanderson got up to turn on a dim lamp. Neither of them seemed anxious for him to leave now, and Dawson started looking for an opening. Before long, Mrs. Sanderson gave it to him.

"Sergeant," she said, "isn't it a little unusual for such a close, well, friendship between a sailor and," she searched for words, "someone like yourself?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "it was a little unusual. But there was a reason for it." The couple waited, expecting some everyday explanation. Dawson began to speak, a little nervously now.

"Jamie never knew. I managed to find out several years before we happened to wind up on the *Cincinnati* together. I kept track of him until then, but it was just luck we ended up on the same ship. It was about a month before I saw him, even then. We were on our way to Athoquineck. He was playing chess against himself in one of the crew's lounges. It took me a few days to look up the rules in the library and learn to play. I checked the watch bill to see when he was free, and I offered to play with him. He was glad to find an opponent, and after a while we got to be friends. But I knew it would be hard on him with his crewmates, so I never let on."

"Never let on what, Sergeant? I don't understand. Why did you

have such an interest in him?" She was puzzled, unprepared. A glance at Sanderson's face showed that he had guessed.

"Mrs. Sanderson . . . he was my brother."

A heavy silence filled the room. Her face grew pale, and she stared at him, as if looking for something she might have recognized.

"But it's not possible," she whispered, "it's kept a secret. Nobody can find out. How can you come here and tell us such a thing?"

She leaned back from him, as if he had suddenly displayed symptoms of some hideous disease.

Dawson spoke carefully, feeling detached somehow from his body.

"Part of my Regiment was cut off in the jungles on Midra III for fifteen months. I was one of the lucky ones to get out alive. If you know who to contact, a year's back pay can buy about any information you're interested in. It's not unusual, really. Many of us know who our . . . how we were born."

"Why have you done this?" Sanderson demanded. "Don't you know how much pain this causes her?"

"Now, Fred," she said with an effort, "try to be calm. He means us no harm."

"No harm! After what happened to you, to both of us, how can you say no harm! I've been trying to forget for twenty-two years. And now this . . . this . . . shows up on our doorstep."

Dawson sat like a statue, hands folded, still leaning forward on his knees out of respect for the chair. His eyes were absolutely expressionless.

"They were right," he said softly, "I should never have come."

"You're *God-damned right* you should never have come. You've got no idea what you're stirring up." Sanderson's eyes were almost black now. "Oh, *sure,* they said. Why, there are over a billion fertile wombs out there, just walking around like nobody's business. Who the hell needs cloning, they said, who needs to spend all that money on research? Why, we'll just look around for a few Supermen with dominant genes and impregnate all those women. Nine months later, there you are, and it hardly cost us a cent. Oh, they were really smart, yes sir." The bitterness in his voice was almost palpable, a thick, dark, angry syrup. "Line 'em up and give 'em a child by some stranger she never even sees. Let's make us a whole race of bastards, everybody. Never mind how she feels about it. Never mind how her *husband* feels. Never mind that she can never have another one because the . . . the . . . damned things are so *big* she gets ruined!"

Sanderson was on his feet. The words came pouring out as if they

had been trapped for years, desperate to be free, to strike down someone, anyone, and Dawson was the perfect target. Slowly, the Soldier stood. There was a flash of fear on Sanderson's rigid face, quickly suppressed. After a moment he realized Dawson was simply waiting for his coat. Grimly, the older man left the room.

"I can understand why you came here, Sergeant," said Mrs. Sanderson, avoiding his eyes now. "Everyone needs a home, something they can call their own. But you have to understand how it was for us. You were born Caesarian, because you were so big. All of you were. I was unconscious, and I never even saw you. It was very difficult for me, and for the other women and their husbands. Some were volunteers, but almost none of the married women. But, no matter how you were conceived, I still carried you for nine and a half . . . are you sure it was me?" Dawson couldn't read the expression in her eyes.

From inside his blouse he took the worn but carefully preserved section of printout. He didn't have to look to know what she read.

> Zygote 233 Birth 356 78 467 890 Given name Charles Xavier Dawson from namesake w. 101st ABN USA d. ca. 1944 INVOLUNTARY DONOR Margaret nmn Sanderson Corvallis Cascade Region NorAm EAR ID 679 56 789 664 Assigned to 1002nd VERT ASSAULT REG///END OF DATAREQ

Mrs. Sanderson held the small slip of paper before her in both hands, as if it were a sheet of music. Then, not seeming to see, she folded it, once, twice, and again. She did not offer to give it back.

Sanderson seemed to be taking a long time to get the coat. Dawson stood, feeling trapped by his own poor judgment. Mrs. Sanderson was lost in her own inner readjustments. Finally, her husband returned.

"Ahhhh . . . Sergeant." A long silence, while Sanderson took his turn staring at the carpet. "I hated you for more than twenty years, and I hated the men who did what they did to my Margaret."

"Fred, dear, the Government was desperate. We were all desperate. Everyone just did what they had to do."

"I know, I know. Just hear me out. Like I said, Sergeant, I hated you enough to kill. But now that you're here, well, it's not so easy to feel that way." Sanderson did not question Dawson's authenticity. Perhaps he had seen something of his wife in the Soldier; perhaps that was why he had lost control. "I spoke harshly before, and, uh, I'm sorry. When I saw your coat on Jamie's bed where I put it, it

was almost as if . . . I'm sorry, that's all."

Dawson took his coat carefully, gently, as if he were removing a toy from the arms of a sleeping child. Sanderson hardly seemed to notice.

"I'm glad I got to meet Jamie's parents. I guess I should just leave it at that. Goodbye. Mrs. Sanderson. Mr. Sanderson."

There seemed to be nothing more to say. Dawson felt incalculably stupid for having done this. He wished to God he had listened to the others. As he reached for the door, the woman spoke.

"It's dark and raining outside, and over six kilos in to the tram station. Fred, we should give him a lift."

"It's all right, Mrs. Sanderson. I'm used to walking."

"No. No, it's only decent. Fred?"

"Mmm? Oh, yes. Sure. Uh, you'll have to ride in the back of the pickup, Sergeant. I'm afraid you won't fit in the cab. It's pretty small, even for us. I'll give you a tarp and a blanket to keep warm."

"Okay, Mr. Sanderson."

He rode in the back of the little electric truck, watching the old road converge behind him, glistening in the occasional lights. All he had to accompany his confused thoughts were the splash and swish of the tires, and the efficient, powerful whine of the motor mounted under the bed. The tall evergreens seemed to pass in judgment on either side, each group reviewing his folly in its turn, all in dark, dark silence. The weather front was beginning to break up, and here and there stars were visible through tears in the cloud cover. The world seemed very cold and distant, carrying out its measureless dances and dramas without concern for Sergeant Charles Dawson.

The Sandersons were good people, he decided, but he had asked too much. He had no mother and father, and could not force the role on virtual strangers, whether a tie of blood existed or not. He and his brothers and sisters were permanently divorced from life here. The comfortable, the familiar, the daily routine of simple, undangerous work, walking the same paths, driving the same roads, the fundamental simplicity of knowing who and where you were; all these were beyond his reach. His place was clear. His own universe of rough jostling, of lifelong friends and enemies, of numbing fear and the occasional desperate joy of combat, of sudden death and of accepting it, of duty and above all the Regiment, these were his and where he belonged. The strange longing that had brought him to the small house in this damp backwash would fade in time, it would come and go less frequently, and he would be free of it. He had come,

and he had seen, and that would be the end of it. Yes.

Soon, they arrived at the brightly lighted tram station, all formed plasteel and subdued colors in the style of the Fifties, just before the war. The town of Corvallis lay just beyond, quiet and dark, even so early in the evening, conserving the tiny allocation it received from the vast North American power grid. There were few people at the station. They stood in isolated little groups, hiding from the harsh glare that always seems to characterize places of coming and going, no matter what the era. Dawson hopped out of the back, folded the tarp and blanket neatly, and set them on the bed. He turned, and the Sandersons stood in front of him, each in a long overcoat against the chill, her arm in his.

"Well," said Dawson, looking at his chrono, "the tram will be leaving soon." He hoped they weren't going to wait to see him off.

"Thanks for the lift."

The couple seemed to want to say something. The man's voice broke free first.

"How, ah, how long does it take to get up to Great Bear Lake, Sergeant?" The isolation of north central Canada was considered ideal for the huge facilities supporting planetside Soldiers.

"About an hour on the tram to Portland. From there I take the main tube up to The Lake, maybe another hour and a half."

Sanderson nodded, seeming disappointed his question didn't generate more in the way of conversation.

"Goodbye," said Dawson, wanting to be off, back with his own kind. As he turned to go, Sanderson spoke up.

"Sergeant?"

Dawson turned, puzzled.

"We . . . we want you to write to us. Let us know how you're doing."

"All right," said Dawson, his face blank with surprise.

"Next time you're back," said the woman, her voice steady, "we want you to come visit for a few days."

"We'll just need some time to adjust, Sergeant, some time." With that, Sanderson put out his hand, a little too emphatically. Dawson took it, and squeezed gently, knowing his strength. Suddenly, Mrs. Sanderson's hands shot out to hold the other hands together, as if to seal them. Dawson found himself looking down at the strange sight, his great fist enclosing the smaller wrist, her gentle, pale hands holding his as if it were some large, angular melon. After a moment, they released. There were no rules of common courtesy to cover the situation. Parents and non-parents, a giant child, born of

anguish, flesh and blood raised in isolation and carefully forgotten. Family but not family. Perhaps someday, if he lived through the war. Dawson looked up to the sky for a moment, concealing something in his eye, and turned to go without a word. As he stepped aboard, he turned once to see them still standing there, each an indistinct blob atop a heavy coat, watching him. They did not wave.

On the ride to Portland, Dawson's thoughts dipped and whirled, carrying his feelings here and there without regard for his desire for some peace. *We want you to come visit.* It seemed an incomplete invitation, but somehow almost more than he could comprehend. The thought of a place to *go* to apart from the Regiment was alien, somehow disturbing. Yet it intensified the diffuse longing that came upon him sometimes, the discomfort of an inner compass needle without a pole to point to.

After he boarded the tube to The Lake, with dozens of other returning Soldiers, he was overcome by an exhaustion he sometimes felt after combat, an odd kind of inner drug that prevented him from spinning off on the end of a wild string of possibilities. As he fell asleep, that last moment with the Sandersons changed subtly, replayed again and again, blurred a little more each time, the components changing imperceptibly, He saw them standing there at last, adoring eyes shining up at him. *Charles, we want you to come home, son.*

He slept, sitting slumped in the familiar cocoon of his greatcoat, surrounded by many other similar forms. He was untroubled by the dreams of running and flames that often woke him in a clammy sweat. Instead, the lines at the corners of his eyes softened, just a little, and the creases in his brow were not quite so deep. That was all. Even as they dream in peaceful contentment, Soldiers rarely smile.

FLAMEGAME
by Steve Perry
art: Ron Miller

Mr. Perry fears his progress has been all too slow—in two years of part-time and three months of full-time writing, he's only sold a dozen stories and one novella—but in fact this represents quite a respectable output of published work in our field. Mr. Perry also reports that, at 31, he's getting grey and wise, and has cut his running to four miles a day. His wife became an executive to support the author's writing habit, his daughter loves cats, and his son named his pet Siamese fighting fish after your editor.

The cracked, barren, and desolate landscape threw its ruptured heat up at Teela's nide and pale body. The stripped hopper offered no protection from the flashes, but, of course, that was the biggest part of it—the risk was what it was all about. The N'terstitchi weren't giving their knowledge away free.

Teela felt more thrill than danger—like she was a teener again, so many years ago, learning to ride her first hopper. She had to fight the tendency to relax—she'd made five hops so far, and nothing had flamed within three hundred meters. Could it be the stories were more hype than fact?

A large fissure split the dry-dead ground eighty meters ahead and below. Her first thought was to stay at maximum bounce as she'd been doing so far—she'd clear it with a good twenty meters to spare.

But when she thumbed the bounce button, she had a sudden impulse in mid-air that made her throttle the hopper back, so she landed on the baked ground just short of the fissure.

What the hell, she thought, just to avoid the monotony. She grinned. She had plenty of time, and this didn't look as if it was going to be half as bad as she'd heard—

—a screaming pillar of red-orange fire erupted from the fissure, hissing and crackling, thrusting so close and hot it took her breath away! An almost liquid blast of heat washed over her nakedness, splashed carelessly so it singed her blond hair and eyebrows, and turned her pale face blood-dark. Hellish winds raked at her bare flesh, bursting balloon-like, the air scorched and dry, a mini-nova—

—and abruptly, the killer flame died, spent in its brief orgasm, was no more, and—

—she lived. Her pulse pounded through her body—a giant drum, throbbing, throbbing—in her temples, in her groin, behind her quivering knees. . . .

Somewhen, her breath came back, finally, and brought with it the mixture of joy and relief and . . . fear.

Oh, Gods, if she hadn't had that impulse, if she hadn't eased off. . . .

She had a vision of her blackened and crisped body, tumbling from the burned-out hopper, falling into that obscene slit of a deadly vagina that spat flames.

Her hand trembled as she reached for the controls.

Gods, she'd been lucky!

Of course, if she could believe the N'terstitchi, luck had nothing to do with it—the end had been decided long before she'd ever begun the game—long before she'd been born. She'd make it through the

spurting geysers of deadly fire, or she wouldn't—but it was supposedly pre-ordained.

If she could believe the N'terstitchi. . . .

The sweat coated her body like a thin layer of gummy paint. Suddenly, it didn't seem so simple, not just some mind's-eye romp, not just a game.

The ground-heat diminished quickly as she shot skyward again, soaring briefly, leaving the deadly fissure behind and below. Her governed arc reached its maximum, thirty meters high, and once again the hopper began to fall—slowly, like a semigravchutist in heavy air on a light planet on a windless day. The slowness gave her time to think—time she didn't want, didn't need. The fear reaction had set in, and she suddenly felt the let-down, the tiredness of the diminishing fight-or-flight syndrome.

Damn! That had been close! She could have died—

She clutched at her panic. Easy. You expected danger. It was the first part that was too easy, too simple. Just stay calm, don't do anything stupid! But her hands still shook when she moved them. The reality penetrated her mind: she could fail—and failure would also mean death.

The terrain just ahead looked cool and inviting, but she knew it was an illusion, subject to all-too-quick change. Ten kilometers, and nearly all that yet to go.

She swallowed, and tasted the bitter-acid of esophageal reflux. When she took a shaky breath, she could smell her own burned hair, and the fear in her sweat. The thin metal of the guard rail suddenly felt all too frail under her hands, hands locked so tightly cramps were beginning in her forearms.

Oh, Gods, am I insane? Am I really doing this?

"You're insane!" Haj had said, his voice incredulous. "You can't!" He rolled over quickly on the humming pneumo-bed, to stare into her pale eyes.

"And why can't I?" She traced a light circle around his nearly hairless nipple with her forefinger, and smiled as his skin goose-pebbled.

"Why? You'll get killed, that's why!"

"I don't think so. And I am going to play."

He glanced down, avoiding her face. "I—I could forbid it," he said quietly.

Teela jerked away from him. When she spoke, her voice was ice-cold, numbing and cutting. "You could. Will you?"

"Teela, I—"

"In your *official* capacity as First Son of the Avil, you can—it's your world. Will you forbid it?" She glared at him, and tightened her hands into fists. The motion caused the thin syntho-silk sheet to fall to her waist, exposing her high, small breasts.

He looked up at her smooth skin. "I—well, I—," he stopped.

Teela forced herself to check the smile, to stay stern-looking. He was young, only eighteen, and she loved him in the way an experienced woman loves a young and naïve man. Aside from being his dance instructor, she was one of his first lovers. She'd taught him much, but she was still twelve years older, and much more adept at emotional debate than he. And she had another advantage: she loved him—but he didn't know it; he loved her, and she did know that.

"Well?" she demanded.

His face flushed. If she had asked for his life, he'd give it—he could deny her nothing. "No," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "But you mustn't play the Flamegame!" He reached for her, and she allowed his hand to touch her shoulder.

"Why?"

"It's much too dangerous, Teacher!"

She couldn't prevent the smile this time. He had reverted to formal address in his desire to be sincere, to convince her. He was a kind person, for a rich man's son, and she was touched.

She leaned over and kissed his chest. "I understand the risks, prince mine. I know what I'm doing."

"Teela, only a handful of those who have attempted the crossing have survived." He clutched her shoulder tighter.

"Fifty-one, in the thirty years since the Game began."

"You know this? Then why?"

"Because the N'terstitchi have something I want, and the only way to get it is to play their Game."

"The soulknow?"

"Yes."

"That's only a myth—"

"No. I met one who survived the Game. He wasn't like an ordinary man. There was a . . . light within him, a—a—difference. He was happier, better, wiser, somehow."

"You would risk your life for such as that?"

She paused for a moment. She'd thought about it for a long time. Sometimes, at the peak of a favorite dance, in the grip of lovemaking, . . . something would seem to achieve a perfect balance, things

would fall into a perfect rhythm, and a . . . feeling would open up within her mind and soul. During those times, she became . . . more than she usually was—she would know more, feel more, *be* more. She would somehow be in tune with things—like bright spots in her childhood when everything was *all right*, everything was perfect.

Then the spell would break, shatter, disperse, and the familiar walls of her ordinary senses would dull the moment, her limited mind would close in, and in some terrible way she couldn't understand, she would be . . . less.

"Yes," she said at last, "it's worth it."

Haj shook his head. Her heart ached for him—he was so young, not yet filled with the simple and mundane, the ordinary experiences of life. It was sad. Older was not always wiser, but it was always older—and age brought experience. During those rare moments, she'd touched upon something beyond simple existing, something which elevated her spirit, and she wanted to find it and hold it.

The N'terstitchi were supposed to hold the key to that something. They were supposed to know how to teach that most wonderful knowledge, the soulknow.

So it was said. And it was really very simple: they'd teach it to anyone who wanted to know—free—if they would play the Flamegame.

And if they survived, of course.

So it was said.

Thirty terrible hops—nearly fifteen minutes into the Game! It seemed a hundred lifetimes. The total distance could be covered in a mere hundred jumps—if she kept the hopper at maximum all the way. But some of those jumps would land her into fissures, so shorter jumps had to be made. Each shorter jump cut into the limited time, but she was still well ahead of schedule, according to the hopper's chrono. So far.

Eight times, spurting prongs of flame had almost taken her. Some closer than others—twice the fire had touched her. Now, there were blisters on her bare shoulders; now, her hair was smoke-stained and burn-shortened; now, the distance seemed to stretch to infinity.

What background she had managed to ferret out indicated that the fossil fuels which fed Hellplain had burned for a hundred years. The N'terstitchi Engineers had used the plain for the Game only a third of that time. Interesting, but unfortunately useless informa-

tion, because each hop was an end to itself, the center of her time and space, and history meant nothing. The last hop meant nothing—it was dead past. The next hop was centuries in the future. Only *this* hop counted.

Ahead, a movement caught her eye. What could that be, here on this killer land? She strained her eyes, searching through the heat-shimmer haze which blurred her tired vision. What—?

There! It was—yes—it was one of the Bestos—a fire-cow. So that rumor was true. Aside from a few ragged plants among the smoking fissures, there was supposedly only one creature which could survive—the fabled Bestos.

So it was said. Her mind kept jumping back to that phrase. Another part of the problem—there was little anyone knew of such things, except the N'terstitchi, and they weren't telling. Nearly everything about the Game was gathered from scraps of rumor, speculation, hearsay—there were few survivors—and they didn't seem to want to talk about it much, either.

Only now, there was no time for speculation, no time! Surviving the crossing was too dangerous for her mind to wander, because it was time for the next hop. . . .

Hop, float, drop.

Hop, float, drop.

"The Warning," V'aul, the N'terstitchi gamesmaster, had said, "for whatever good it might do."

Another part of the ritual. Each player was given the Warning—a brief catalogue of the rules and dangers of the Flamegame. Supposedly, the key to enhanced survival lay in the Warning, if only one was sufficiently alert enough to draw it out. That was the trick—the N'terstitchi Engineers were a brilliant race, odd sportsmen who played devious games of their own devising. Everything they said or did could be twisted or shaded for their own obscure purposes. It was said that the main reason they ran the Flamegame was to wager on its outcome—though they supposedly didn't believe in gambling. A very strange race, indeed.

The thigh-high thin humanoid gleamed like purple glass in the morning sunlight. Distant flares from the plain were mirrored from his smooth and hairless skin, so his very integument seemed alive and moving in livid purple and red patterns.

He gestured with a thin, four-fingered hand. "Your hopper."

Teela looked at the barely framed single-passenger jump platform. Originally, it might have been a sport hopper—with some

important modifications.

The passenger stand offered no enclosure or shielding—it was a tinker toy on a repellor-motor. It was limited to short hops, of low altitude. At its highest range, it wouldn't be able to clear the tallest of the ground flares. Each time it went up, it would soon have to come down—picking where was controllable, but limited.

Mistakes, she knew, were usually fatal.

"You may not wear any protective garments," V'aul continued. "You may expect no protection from the hopper to any degree. You must not exceed the time limit of three half-hours, or you will automatically be disqualified. You may not expect any help from outside the playing field if you encounter trouble—once you start, you are entirely on your own." He paused. "If your hopper is damaged, you may attempt to continue on foot; however, there are animals. The Warning requires me to inform you that no player has ever survived an unaided trek on foot."

Teela nodded, unsmiling. She didn't feel as if he was trying to frighten her—but only telling it like it was. Not. Don't. So far, the Warning was only negative. Her resolve hadn't wavered, but she wanted to hear the clue which would give her an edge.

"Since the Spinner has already spun the web of your future, it cannot be altered. It will be as it will be."

V'aul turned and began to walk away.

"That's it? That's *all*?"

"I have given you the Warning."

"But—but—" There was nothing helpful there! "When does my time begin?" She asked, slightly confused.

V'aul turned his head slightly, never pausing in the short, quick and flowing steps of the N'terstitchi glide. "Now," he said.

Quickly, Teela stripped. No protective garments, he'd said. To an N'terstitchi, that meant anything. They never wore any kind of clothing except in deep space, and only then because even their body control couldn't overcome hard vacuum.

Teela took a deep breath, and sprinted to the hopper. With a thrust that quivered her slim-muscled legs, the spindly hopper shot into the air, the ground dropped away, and she was airborne.

For the last time that day, she felt cold.

"Maybe I'm stupid," Haj had said morosely, "but I just don't see *why*. . ."

"Haj, if I could tell you, make you see, I would. There's a . . . lack in me, which makes me less than I could be."

"But you're so much!"

She smiled, and he quickly added, "I mean, you're a Mistress of the Dance, an expert. You can do the Arezilah pre-lim and the Cantilil Kata. You—"

"I know I can dance," she said, adding a small sigh. "I've been to many worlds, done many things—what seems like a great accomplishment to you has less meaning to me. I know what I can *do*—what I don't know is what I *am*!"

"I know. You're Teela Amise, daughter of Rakul and Benuva Amise of Hanshi's World. You are sister to Brek the Painter and Cklu the MVEDIC. You are one of the best dancers in human form. You . . ." he trailed off, as she shook her head.

She didn't want to hurt him, didn't want him to feel fear for her, didn't want to cause him pain—but there was no choice. There was something, something important to be learned, and she had to learn it, she had to! Someday, perhaps, he would feel the same way; now, there was no way to make him see. . . .

Hop, float, drop.

Hop, float, drop.

Fifty-eight bounces, and somehow, she was still alive. But now she was so tired! The heat sucked at her and drained her strength. The constant tension of not knowing—would she live through the next hop?—dragged at her with lead and iron fingers.

In all her years as a dancer, since she was ten, through the hardest routines, the most strenuous routines, she'd never felt the way she felt now. She'd been tired—oh, yes!—but only muscle-tired, bone-tired! This, this was soul-tired, *being*-tired. And there was no rest—she was less than halfway done, and a stop would mean possible failure, even death.

Odd, how her mind considered failure before death. But then, failing had always been the worst she could imagine. Death was merely the end. To fail and continue living was much worse.

Below, she spotted another of the huge, lumbering Bestos. It watched her sail by, its large, horn-protected eyes looking curiously dry in the damnable heat. The creature looked familiar, somehow, and she suddenly realized why: it looked almost exactly like the sphigs her family had raised for meat on their Outciv ranch—years ago when she'd been a child still at home.

Home. Hanshi, the garden world. She remembered the quiet green of the Outciv, all woods and cool grass and mildly pleasant days. . . .

Too pleasant. Else, she'd probably still be there, tending the flocks,

raising the vegetables, like her parents and her grandparents before them had done. Yes, life on Hanshi was easy, secure, comfortable—and dull. And dull-and-comfortable people don't grow very much, don't change.

It was not for her. She'd learned to dance, and that had been her ticket out. With Brek, it had been art, with Cklu, medicine. None of the children had remained, much to the dismay of their parents.

They'd never really understood. Her father was a stoic, solid farmer, not given to emotion. He did his job, took care of his family—that was enough—what else was there?

Her mother had yearned to see the stars once—but it was an old dream she'd long since given up. Perhaps that was why Teela had felt the urge to leave.

Her skill had taken her far. Now, she taught dance to the rich, on worlds fifty light-years from home. But it wasn't enough. Drifting over the inferno, she wasn't sure exactly what she sought, but she knew it was important enough to risk everything to find it. The yearning had to be fed, somehow.

She glanced back down at the Bestos, whose features so curiously resembled those of the sphigs she'd known. . . .

The Bestos was larger, of course, easily twice as big as a sphig. It was elephant-large, armored with a natural, fire-proof covering on its belly and legs—not on its back. That made sense—the only enemy such a creature would have would be the furnace below it. There were no natural predators on any of the Seventeen Worlds capable of attacking anything on deadly Hellplain from above—at least none without intelligence.

Hop, float, drop.

Hop, float, drop.

Hop, float, drop.

The repetition ground away at her, numbing her adrenalin-depleted senses, blunting her perceptions. So tired. She'd been born here doing this, had done it for eons and more, would do it forever.

It seemed as if every square centimeter of her body was hot. She felt the itch of a dozen small burns, the swelling of raw blisters whelping up all over her. Her already short hair had been burned and re-burned until it felt like little more than a frizzy cap. She smelled of fire and dust and burned hair—but she no longer sweated—her body refused to give up the moisture.

Sixty-five hops. Sixty-eight. Seventy. Exhaustion had settled about her shoulders like a heavy cloak, drooping her like a bent and aged hag. Habit kept her going, pushing the controls. Inertia dragged at

her. Her eyes felt as if they'd melted and sunk to their roots in her roasted brain. The world, all of creation, was nothing more than a blurry, red haze. Could anything be worth this?

Hop, float, drop.

Hop, float, drop.

How many times was it now? She'd lost count. The hopper touched down, she pushed the button automatically, robot-like, and—

—nothing happened. Dully, she tapped the control several times, not comprehending, not understanding: suddenly the realization hit her—the hopper was broken! Some sort of malfunction, it didn't work. It wasn't going to go.

After five minutes, she was convinced. The machine was dead—and she was alone and naked on Hellplain.

No! The stillness was broken only by the flaming tongues of deadly fire that licked at the rumpled sky.

She wouldn't be able to finish in time. That was her first thought.

She woild die. That was her second thought.

No! It mustn't be! If she didn't finish,if she died, the N'terstitchi would never tell her the secret.

Nobody would come to help, they'd told her that. None had ever survived the crossing on foot. There were animals. . . .

She screamed, a wordless cry of denial in the not-caring hot winds. Desperation pushed her, and she scrambled from the dead hopper and began to run.

Her bare feet were hot, burning, baking, cooking weights, heavy as molten lead, she could hardly move them—but she kept running, blindlessly, aimlessly, panicked. Go! yelled the fear in her mind; go, go, run, run!

But where?

The cracked and burned ground reached for her with hot projections; it opened small cracks to trip her, it blew super-heated air in her face to confuse her—it was frying pan and fire, existing only to roast her, to stab her with rods of torturing heat.

Some time later—minutes? hundreds of years?—she collapsed; spent, unable to continue. It was no use. The roaring flames surrounded her everywhere. Without the overview from the air—the cool, safe air—she couldn't see the fissures, couldn't pick a safe path, couldn't go on.

She couldn't make it the final three kilometers to safety.

Around her, the flares sang in raspy triumph, reaching for the infinity of space. There was nothing to see except burned desolation, nothing to feel except the killing heat, no emotion but defeat. It was

over with, done, finished. Her hope began to dwindle like an ice cube there on Hellplain.

Neutrality ensued, no-time existed. She had passed beyond despair, she was finished, waiting for death—

—No! Deep within her mind, something stirred. A cornered thing screeched from its dark cave, and refused to give in. Her mind seemed to split, she became like an observer watching as *something* boiled forth in a terrible wave and covered her conscious mind.

No! it screamed, louder. No you don't! Not yet, not yet! the thing snarled, defiantly, and gnashed its teeth.

She was amazed. What—?

This isn't why we came, it hissed. You can't stop now!

You can't! I won't *let* you!

The strain was too great. She hallucinated. Visions danced about her on the raw plain, unaffected by the surrounding furnace. She watched in terrified awe. Dancers she'd known. Haj was here, her parents, her brothers, the N'terstitchi. They spoke to her, moved about her, laughed at her.

Was she to go insane before she died?

No! The thing that was part of her mind stirred harder.

No! You wanted to know. See through them. See the truth.

But the drug of illusion stayed. The visions continued, and grew clearer, stronger. She saw planets she'd visited, people and aliens she'd known and loved—and hated. They flickered into pseudo-life on the ground, romping beside her, mocking her.

We should be enough, they seemed to say. Why should you want more?

She could see them, smell them, almost, she could touch them.

Because, her mind cried, because there is more! I just don't know how to find it.

The visions danced. On the edge of her dreamworld, even one of the hideous Bestos materialized. . . .

Idiot! The other part of her mind gibbered and roared. That's no vision! Look! See reality!

Even as the others faded, forced away by her double-brain clearing itself, the Bestos stayed. It *was* real!

Thirty meters away, it glared at her with its bottom-hooded dry-yellow eyes. It moved closer. She could see the black, hooked horn of its cruel upper lip, curling over the lower jaw with its sharp teeth; gleaming and sharp spike-barbs. She watched as the beast's heavy claws dug easily into the rock-hard ground with every step. It was close enough for her to smell the dry-rot rankness of it body.

Her split mind scrabbled frantically, repeating what it remembered about the creatures. None had survived the crossing on foot—there were animals—animals—animals—

The Bestos moved with glacial slowness toward her, but it never paused. It was as if it knew she was too tired to run away, as if it had all the time in the world. . . .

The new thing in her mind screamed again. Fool! Think! Do something!

Teela forced herself to her feet, exhaustion tugging and tearing at every muscle. Cramps knotted her legs, her back cried in a paroxysm of pain.

Why won't you let me alone? She cried to herself, to her second mind. It was too hard. All she wanted to do was to lie down, to quit trying—

No! The mental voice cried. Don't let this *thing* walk over and—

—do what? Oh, Gods, what would it do? Crush her? Eat her? What? Her bowels knotted like dying snakes, roiling as if beheaded.

She could never move fast enough.

There was no way out, none! She reached her limit, her conscious mind overloaded, the stress became too much—

—and the dormant part of her brain took over. Wait! Listen! Think! There was something the N'terstitchi said, there it is, right there on the edge of your memory! Look! Can't you see?

With a flash of blinding perception, it came to her. A perfectly logical insight, fed by memory which never forgot anything, however small.

The puzzle of the Bestos suddenly became too-simple, lost in the whole of the greater picture. Like a crystal in a dark stream, she saw it. Her double mind struck against itself, fused and became whole, and for the first time, her brain functioned totally, as it had always been meant to do.

She *knew*!

She grinned weakly, and with an effort suddenly made worlds easier, she straightened to face the slow-moving creature. She shook with spasms, but not those of fear.

Rather, it was laughter.

Damn the N'terstitchi, anyway!

And bless them!

"I must have missed something," Haj said, afterward. His eyes conveyed his puzzlement. "If you've told me everything, I must have missed something. Did you leave something out?"

"No."

"Then how? How could you know?"

She smiled. "It was in the Warning, all along."

Haj shook his head.

"The Warning was negative about everything—except the animals."

"But he said the animals were dangerous."

"No, he only made it sound that way. What he actually said was that if my hopper was damaged, I could try to continue on foot, but 'there are animals'."

"Same thing. I—"

"Wrong—that was my mistake, too. I assumed."

Haj sighed, and shook his head again. "But such a slim clue! I would have never gotten it from that."

"Neither would I. There was more, much more, but until I was pushed to my limits, I couldn't see the forest for the trees in the way. When I reached the point of hopelessness, I became divorced from my subjectivity. The objective part of my mind took over when I had no options—I literally forced myself to see."

"Yeah, well I still don't see—"

"Hellplain has been burning for how long?"

"A hundred-odd years."

"And do you suppose the Bestos have been there all that time?" She sounded like a teacher, she knew, but she had to try and allow him to see it for himself.

"Who knows? Probably."

"What about their form?"

He was getting impatient. "Armor-plated, heat-resistant giant cows, that I do know!"

"With large teeth," she added.

"Right."

"And how long does it take for a large animal species to evolve a complicated protective mechanism such as fireproof covering on its body?"

"Hundreds of generations, I suppose. But what—?"

"And how long has Hellplain been burning?"

"Dammit, I told you, a hundred years—!" Suddenly his face lit up. Teela's own grin increased.

"Son-of-a-gre'el! Of course!" He pounded his fist onto the bed. "No way the Bestos could have evolved naturally in such a short period! And teeth! What could they eat? Why, they must have been—"

"—developed and put there and maintained by the N'terstitchi

Engineers," she finished, "for one reason only."

"I can't believe it. That's a hell of a lot of trouble to go to—especially now that someone knows. Now, anybody who plays the Game will—"

"Wrong again," she said quietly. "It will be changed. While it might seem like a lot of trouble to us, it's not to a race as advanced as the N'terstitchi. I don't pretend to understand their motivations—nor their strange beliefs in predestination. But in a short while, the few Bestos—and there are only a few—will be removed from Hellplain and altered, to fit some other exotic environment. It will be hardly any work for them at all."

He leaned back and grinned. "Damn! So you made it! And now, I suppose, you'll get to learn the soulknow?"

"Oh, that?" She smiled at him. "I've already learned it."

Haj said nothing, stunned. Then, she could see it on his face; he could see the difference, now that he really *looked*. She had changed.

She could *tell* him, of course, but she couldn't make him *know* it. That was something each person had to learn on his own. But she smiled warmly, and reached out to touch his face gently.

Everything was going to be all right, now.

V'aul had been waiting at the far edge of the Hellplain when she arrived and dismounted from the docile Bestos—a creature designed to carry passengers across the deadly ground. She was still within the time limit—not that it mattered, anymore.

She glanced down at the tiny alien without anger. "The hopper was rigged to fail, of course?"

"Of course."

"What would have happened if I'd stayed with it?"

"It would have eventually started working again."

"After the time limit expired?"

He smiled, the thin, toothless smile of the N'terstitchi. "Of course."

"Is it done that way every time?"

"No. Each being is different." He shrugged, an almost human gesture. "You traveled your own skein—the Spinner spun your web when he spun them all, but each is different. What is, is."

Curiously, she understood that last statement. Like she had understood so many things since that moment in the fires with the Bestos when her mind had finally joined to itself, the conscious and unconscious sections melding until she *knew*.

She didn't need the N'terstitchi to teach her about herself. No one did. In fact, nobody *could* teach another that—it had to be learned and worked for alone. All alone. In her, fear had been the stimulus.

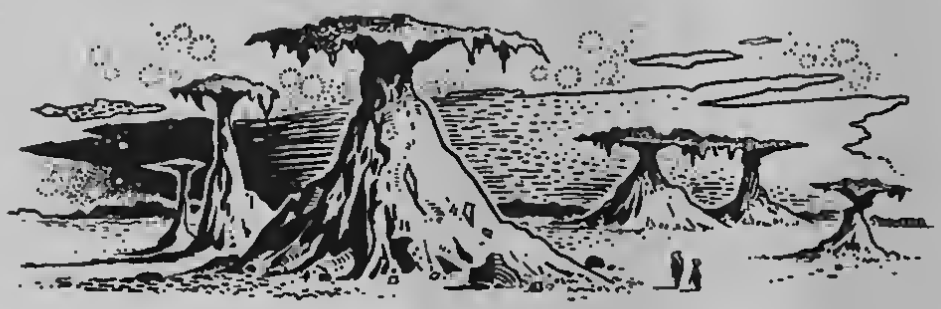
That's all the secret knowledge of the N'terstitchi soulknow was. They allowed players to come up against the toughest possible opponents—themselves—and gave them the chance to learn the most basic of truths: He who learns teaches himself.

Always.

That's all there was to it.

And once she knew that, she realized something else:

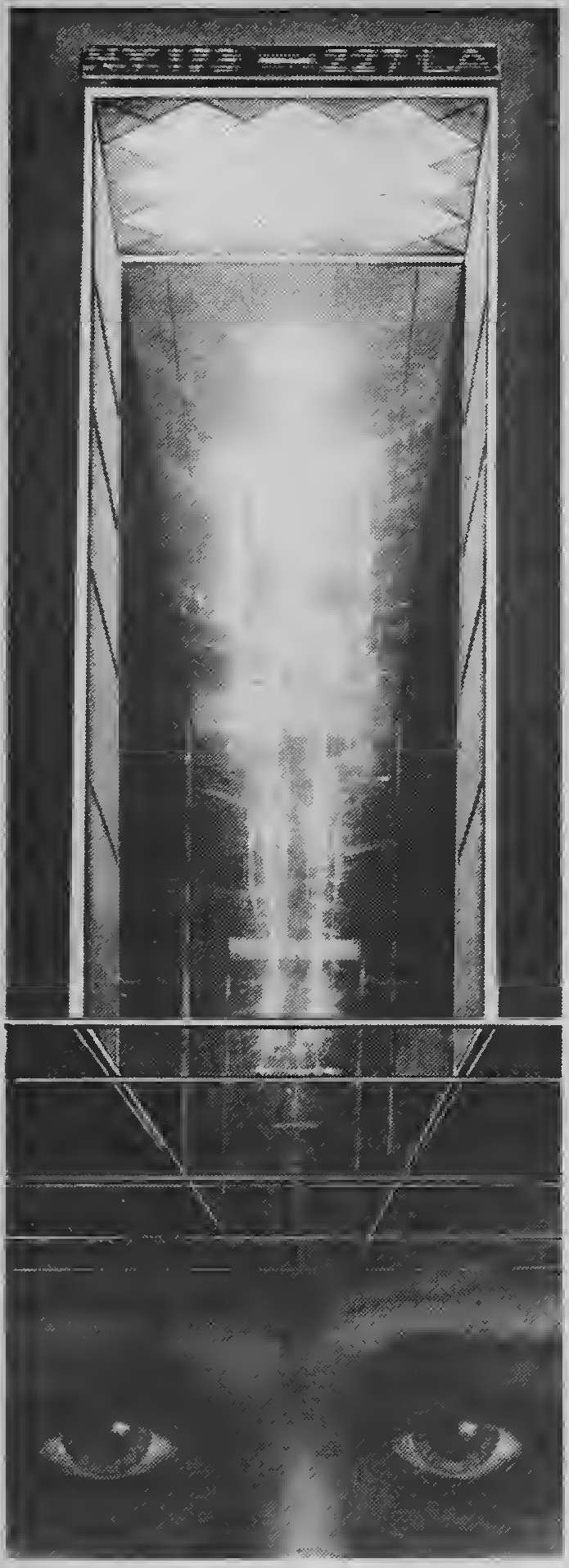
That's all there'd *ever* been to it.



SECOND ANSWER TO THE ERASING OF PHILBERT THE FUDGER (from page 87)

On Thursday morning Philbert was told he would be erased that afternoon. Since Philbert had no way of knowing it would be Thursday, this news came to him as a total surprise. His erasure took place on Thursday. Everything the judge said proved to be accurate.

Dozens of papers in philosophical journals have struggled to explain where Philbert's reasoning went wrong. It is the most notorious of the so-called "prediction paradoxes" of modern logic. If you are interested you'll find it discussed in more depth (with a different story line) in the first chapter of my book *The Unexpected Hanging*.



THE FARE

by Sherri Roth

art: Karl B. Kofoed

The author has a degree in journalism from Northwestern University, and worked for two years as a technical editor and writer for an energy research institute in Chicago. Recently, she moved to Colorado, where she is at work on a pilot's license–and more fiction. "The Fare" is her first published story.

The little girl had rosy cheeks and a big smile, and when she walked into a transport booth alone, Corin turned her head. She couldn't watch.

Instead, she stared at a man closing the door on another transport booth–and while the machinery wailed she pictured in her mind every detail of what was happening. When she knew he was gone–to New York, Tokyo, or wherever–she felt a tremor in her legs. She supposed she should stop watching people leave.

She pulled her old brown coat tighter around herself–for fifty years it'd fought Chicago's wind, and its grey skies and its grey air–now the coat was a friend. Maybe an only one. Corin allowed herself just a minute of self-pity while she tried to remember how many years it'd been since she exchanged more than a sentence with anyone.

"Are you scared of those machines?"

Corin looked down, startled, at the small boy in front of her. His eyes were inquisitive–too much so–and the decades-old paranoia came back instantly. She ignored him.

" 'Cause you never use them. I've seen you here lots of days, but you never go anywhere. Are you scared?"

He wasn't going to be easily ignored. Well, why pretend? Especially to this child.

"Yes. I am."

"How come?"

Corin sighed. This could be difficult.

"Is it because you don't understand them? Fear of the unknown?" The boy would have already had two years of psychology.

"No, not really."

"If you like, I can explain to you how a transport machine works. Kind of." He'd only had a few months of science.

"That's not necessary." Corin almost laughed. Then she swallowed hard. "Child, I understand the process very well. I invented it."

"Oh yeah?" The boy's eyes widened.

"Yeah." This time she did laugh–a little bitterly. But before he had time to ask another question, she was walking away–no, running, actually. It looked funny for someone her age.

The boy, Seth, was there the next day and the next, looking for the odd old woman's brown coat in the crowd. He was sure now that she was someone truly strange, and being ten years old anywhere is reason enough to seek out someone bizarre. The third day he found her, as she stared blankly at one of the transportation host-

esses.

"Tell me about how you invented the machine."

Corin jerked with surprise. The child again. "I don't want to talk about the transport machine. Please."

"Are you displacing your fear of something else onto these machines?" Corin closed her eyes with an exasperated expression. He'd probably learned about fear displacement last week.

"Then let's talk about something else." Seth smiled while his eyes nicely asked the old woman not to run. She relented. The child seemed harmless enough and company felt good.

Which was why, she supposed, she offered to buy him an ice cream cone, while he grinned and asked her questions. And it was probably why she began babbling–about ice cream and carnivals, and her own childhood in Goodland, Kansas, and the summer she'd gone with her folks to the Grand Canyon.

"You mean you spent most of your childhood stuck in this tiny town, and you couldn't transport out of it?"

"Seth, I was born in 1966. We felt glad just to live near an Interstate. That was part of a great highway system back then."

"I know." Seth remembered his history. "Then you're only 81. Gee, I thought you were at least a hundred."

"Seth, why are you so curious about my life?" Her tongue caught a drip of simulated chocolate chip ice cream before it ran off the cone.

Seth shrugged. His mouth was full of imitation strawberries. "Can't find any pirates. Can't find any cowboys." He chewed a few times. "At least you're interesting."

Corin laughed. And by the end of her ice cream cone she was telling him about her Ph.D. in 1991. And he still didn't seem bored.

"You'll see me again soon," he promised when they parted back on the street. Corin smiled and waved. She supposed she would.

A fair number of days passed before Seth made it down to the neighborhood transportation center on a day when Corin was there. He feared, she supposed, that she'd died–and had fantasized about her carrying to the grave some ghastly secret. In fact, he was so caught up in his invented drama that he seemed surprised to see her brown coat. After his initial shock, and even disappointment, he was relieved.

"Want another ice cream cone?" Corin's wrinkled smile betrayed her own delight at seeing him.

Seth smiled a little self-consciously.

"How about a drink instead?" he suggested.

"You mean alcohol?" She was shocked in spite of herself.

"I've had a parental permission card since I was eight. Most kids do." Seth was glad he hadn't suggested anything harsher.

"Okay." Corin couldn't see arguing. But she felt funny walking into the bar with him.

Yet Seth confidently ordered them both a drink, and as they sat down he began telling her all about how he was studying to be a humanologist. ("That's someone who studies people," he clarified. Corin tried not to smile.) Halfway through the drink the conversation hit a lull, so Corin picked up with her own monologue, telling Seth about accepting her first job, in Chicago. They ordered another round and Corin kept talking.

"You mean four years after you joined Consolidated Technology you were promoted to head of a project? At the age of 29?" They were finishing their second round now and Corin was smiling proudly.

"Yeah." Never mind that back then she'd been trying so desperately to prove her competence.

"You must have been working hard to demonstrate your abilities," Seth said. "Why?"

Corin gave up with a slightly dizzy shrug. Liquor had always affected her easily.

"Because I was blond. Do you know anything about old stereotypes? And because I was, well . . ." she shrugged and looked at the old blue work shirt she'd worn under the brown coat. Seth nodded with the lack of interest of a ten-year-old.

"No one thought I could do anything. So I did everything–better than anyone else. You know what?" She stretched her arms behind her head contentedly as the wrinkles on her face radiated out from a grin. "I'd do it that way again."

Seth nodded sagely; he didn't blame her a bit. He ordered them both another round.

"So what was the project?" he asked, trying to sit up straighter. For all his practice, it didn't take much liquor to affect his small body.

"Transport."

"You really did work on transport?"

"I told you. I invented it."

Seth was beginning to believe her.

"Oh, for years I had scores of people under me, plus the support of the best computer jocks in the industry, chemists, electrical en-

gineers, the best of everything. But the original idea was mine, and I did the preliminary work by myself. By 1998 the conceptual development was done."

Seth was becoming impressed. He gulped what was left in his glass.

"You must have been proud."

"Proud? Shit, I was horrified. I came to hate the damn thing." Liquor had never done much for Corin's language.

"Why?" Seth leaned forward to scrutinize the old face that was now becoming interesting for its accomplishments instead of its oddities.

Corin's comment obviously puzzled him. He knew that transport had changed the world–it and fusion. Historians always said mobility and endless cheap energy had affected the world more drastically than cars and a gasoline economy had a century before. Besides, transport had enabled him to go to Africa just last week, he'd said. It allowed his family to make frequent visits to his ancestors' home in China. It made it possible for him to have seen every major city in the world dozens of times over. And it had made the ugly, bulky freeways into obsolete wastes; the space-consuming cars, past generations' source of junk metal. No one doubted transport had long since made the world a cleaner and more cosmopolitan place.

"Transport made me lose my husband," Corin blurted out with an impending touch of drunken melancholy.

"He was killed working on it?" This was real drama. No wonder the woman had been so nervous about talking.

"Of course not. Don't be stupid. We tested that thing on hundreds of animals before a human got close to it. No, outwardly the problem was that he thought one water molecule was the same as another, and I didn't. Inwardly, it was that he loved the lady who led the project. Her confidence, I suppose. Her having all the qualities he lacked. And she faltered." Corin paused. "It was a pretty stupid reason to love a person."

Seth didn't know whether to agree or not. He liked to stay away from these sappy adult discussions. But as the waiter set down another round, the silence was getting uncomfortable. "Why'd you love him?" he tried.

"Because he was the only man I ever met who was smarter than I was. Now wasn't that dumb?"

"Yes."

"No, it wasn't." Corin was getting as irrational as she was moody.

The second silence was longer, and even more uncomfortable.

"Well, what happened?"

"When I got so I couldn't head the project, my doubts scared him. I think they reminded him of all the things he hated about himself. We argued for a long time and split. Had our last fight on New Year's Eve, 1999. Memorable way to end a millennium."

"Corin." Seth was starting to feel the kind of concern that comes with months of shared confidences, or four rounds of drinks. He looked her in the eye. "Why'd you hate the project?"

But Corin wasn't divulging her secret so easily. She was enjoying the companionship it was buying her.

"Did you ever hear of 'A Thousand and One Nights'?"

"Huh?"

"It means I'm not going to tell you now." Corin hugged herself with a childish delight. "You're going to have to come visit me sometime. I'll tell you then."

Seth was at her door the next morning. Corin opened it just a crack; her shining eyes gave away her excitement at having a visitor–her first in thirty, or was it forty, years. Her gnarled fingers fumbled with the security chain.

As soon as the door was opened fully, Seth's eyes widened at the explosion of color. He'd never seen anything like it. Sky blue walls, bright gold furniture and a lime green rug completely drowned out the view of Chicago's grey lake and sky in the background. Corin showed him in and plopped comfortably onto the rug, sitting in a cross-legged position as if she'd been comfortable in it for decades. Seth walked carefully across the carpet and sat gingerly on one corner of the bright green and gold divan. He felt like he needed sunglasses.

"Would you like some milk? Or wine–I have wine," she corrected herself. Early that morning she'd walked the two blocks to the grocery store to get both. But Seth shook his head.

"You know, I once insisted upon this apartment." Corin made conversation lightly. "It's the highest in the area . . . I get claustrophobic easily.

"I like to sit here and stare at the lake. Or sometimes I walk to the edge of the water and stare. It's grey, and lifeless I know, but at least it's clean now . . . and I like being able to see the horizon."

Seth was nodding absently.

"And I like to walk through the neighborhood once in awhile. It's old–and so drab, how I've hated Chicago for its drabness–but at least

it's clean and safe now. You can't imagine what a slum this would have been fifty years ago."

Seth seemed lost in his own thoughts, and Corin realized she was babbling even more than usual. "I guess you know I never transport anywhere," she added. Seth looked up. Might as well plow right in, Corin thought.

"Seth, what do you know about transport?"

"Not much, I guess. There's a science sequence in our school, but I'm not in it. It's only for, well, you know, the types that are going to pursue a career in that sort of thing. Most of us are in the humanities."

"Okay. But you must know that it measures the location and type of every molecule in a person's body at a given instant . . ." She noticed Seth looked bored already; the mention of the word molecule was all it took to lose some people's interest.

"And then it transports the constituent atoms and reassembles the molecules at another location," Seth finished for her in the singsong of recitation.

"Wrong. And although that's what everyone thinks it does, no one has ever been told that."

"Huh?"

"Seth, I was working on a project that would do just what you described. Thanks to some incredible advances in single-wavelength photography and in computer data assimilation, we could measure the locations of the individual molecules. And the developments in magnetic fields which were enabling scientists to control a fusion reaction enabled us to assemble the molecules back into a living being with the incredible precision required. It all took a phenomenal amount of energy, but we had that too. The remaining problem was to find a way to transport the atoms after we broke the molecules down. Until it occurred to someone, why transport them?"

"How else would you move the person?"

"You wouldn't. You'd measure everything, and then reconstruct an identical person at the other end. It'd be much easier."

"That's ridiculous. What would you do with the original person?"

The wrinkles on Corin's face settled into the well-worn lines of a bitter laugh. "That was a problem. We considered cyanide, but settled on electrocution."

"You mean you killed them?"

"Kill, Seth. It's present tense. When you walk into a transport booth today you *are* electrocuted. Murdered. Your body is broken down into its constituents and used to assemble other bodies trans-

porting to your origin."

"But that's illegal."

Corin's laugh was still bitter. "Not really. After all, an identical you is put together at the other end. A person who is legally you, and doesn't differ from the original in any discernible way. As Max–that's my ex-husband–pointed out, what's the difference between one water molecule and another? None. So what's the difference if you're reassembled from the original molecules or new ones? It's still you. Or so he claimed."

Seth felt queasy; this wasn't good news on top of a hangover. He'd transported well over a thousand times in his life. That meant he'd died a thousand times in his life. But that was ridiculous.

"Oh, it took a while to establish that the assembled product carried memory, emotions, all that. But when it seemed to, well, there was nothing left to say. Why transport the atoms?"

"But shouldn't people know when they're being killed?" The question sounded silly, but Seth didn't know how else to phrase it.

"I thought so," Corin answered. "That's where I ran into my first problems. Hundreds of people at Consolidated Technology knew how transport worked. I'm sure thousands know today. But none of the others cared then, and none of them care now. I suppose they're selected for that nowadays. Back then, the executives were very nervous about 'people' finding out. 'People' meant the press, religious groups, leftist groups, anyone they imagined might give them trouble. They thought if they could just get the system into circulation, get it used by everybody for awhile, then everyone could accept the truth if it came out."

"But . . ." It was really the only word Seth could think of.

"I know. I thought of all kinds of objections. What about a person's soul? I believed in that; Max didn't. He laughed at my arguments, said surely if a person was transported, any soul would go with them. Unless I thought it was scotch taped onto a person's spleen or something."

Seth winced at that image. He claimed to believe in souls, too.

"I kept saying, 'You can't reproduce a person over and over and not lose something–some vibrance, some originality.' And he kept saying, 'We're not making photocopies.' I gave up. First arguing with him, then arguing with officials at Consolidated. I turned in my resignation in 2006, anxious just to get out of Chicago. I'd spent fifteen years here and I hated this place. Hated the traffic. Hated the grey sky, hated the grey lake, even hated the grey pigeons."

Seth had trouble understanding anyone hating Chicago. It was

home, he couldn't imagine a traffic jam, and if the grey or cold ever bothered him, he left. He'd spent last weekend with his older brother in Morocco, and a whole week the month before with friends in New Zealand. No big deal. Then he remembered that a different him had been in New Zealand. And a third person in Morocco. Well, what difference did it make? *He* was here.

"So why'd you come back to Chicago?"

"I didn't. I never got to leave. My resignation was politely refused. Consolidated saw a chance to make billions and I was the only one on the team who potentially stood in the way. So I was treated with an interesting blend of threats and bribery. I was guarded round the clock. No one had to tell me 'one false move and you're dead.' I knew it."

Seth looked at Corin the way he might have gazed at King Arthur.

"Don't look at me that way," Corin snapped. "Listen, to make it easier for me, I was given everything I wanted–this place, clothes, jewelry. They even brought me French perfume–they must have felt guilty as hell to do that. I took it all. And enjoyed it, in my own martyred way, while hating the people I worked for and bitching until I had no friends left in the company. Of course I had none outside it."

Seth's gaze had dropped back to one of careful scrutiny.

"Five years after my 'resignation' we had transport on the market. I could have boycotted the project, but instead I'd gone on putting everything I had into it, I guess because it was everything I had. Do you realize what a phenomenal achievement that was–only sixteen years spent on development?"

Seth didn't seem to realize, so Corin dropped the point.

"By the 20's transport was part of modern life, and in 2031 I was allowed to retire early at 65, with a tiny pension, the right to keep all my baubles, and an easement of 'restrictions' as they were tactfully called. And why not? Everyone in the world had transported so many times by then that Consolidated could feel pretty safe. Other forms of transportation had become obsolete."

"But what about you?" Seth asked, shifting his position. His left leg had fallen asleep, and she suspected facts had stopped registering twenty minutes ago.

"Me? I was bitter, tired, and wanted more than anything to get out of here."

"So you left?"

"How? I've had years to think about it, to realize how really humorous it is. Thanks to me, by 2031 there were exactly two ways

to get out of Chicago. Transport or walk." She looked wistful. "I've thought of walking."

"Not of transporting?"

She just shuddered.

Corin was surprised that Seth visited her several times after that, and that often when he met her on the street he spent some time walking and talking with her. She had no more mysteries to share, but she began to realize that he genuinely enjoyed her company, and that knowledge gave her a warm feeling that she'd been without for years. She'd had a silly kind of hopeful paranoia for awhile that he might run to the newspapers with her story. She'd fantasized for days about whether Consolidated would have her killed, even now; about whether transport would be shut down; about whether she'd be a hero, villain, or martyr in the public eye. But something deeper in her realized that the press of 2047 couldn't have cared less–they'd all transported too often themselves.

And of course, Seth did no such thing. He did seem a little thoughtful at first, but after a couple of weeks he blithely told her about transporting to Mexico City for the weekend, and she knew he'd overcome whatever fears she'd passed on to him. She felt a little sad, though, because she always saw him as a bit of a stranger after that. He did mention once, casually, that he'd decided not to discuss transport with any of his friends. They might get upset.

The whole incident revived some of Corin's own desire to go to the press. But besides being pointless, there was still that gunman–hidden, probably gone if he'd ever existed, but maybe there. Dammit, if she hadn't been scared of dying, she'd have gone to the press years ago.

It was months, no, over a year later when she left one afternoon to walk down to the lake and found Seth standing behind the corner of her building.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I haven't seen you in weeks."

"I was waiting for you." He seemed flustered.

"You can come up and see me, you know; you don't have to hang around down here." She smiled at him; he gave her a nervous grin in response and walked with her down to the lake.

Two days later she was going into the little grocery store down the street when she saw Seth duck around the corner. As she came out of the store he appeared with a nervous offer to carry her groceries.

"Maybe he has a crush on me," Corin worried to herself. No, even the most flattering look in the mirror told her that sort of thing had ceased to be a problem decades ago.

"Where are you going?" Looking up she noticed Seth taking her groceries across the street towards the transport center.

"I want to show you something." He was avoiding her gaze. She followed, puzzled. They were ten feet from the booths when he dropped the groceries and scooped her up like she was a child. Funny, her first thought was a realization of how much he'd grown. Then the rational part of her mind realized what he was doing, deduced that he must have punched in the destination and paid already, and saw the look of mild surprise on the hostess' face. The irrational part of her mind went into a blind panic; she could hear herself screaming and feel herself clawing at the door as Seth closed it, clawing with all the strength of her will to survive. Then the shock hit, and she ended.

And began again, in a lone booth at the edge of a tiny town in western Kansas. The Corin that fell against the door there knew without looking that it was Goodland–Seth would have done that for her.

She stepped out of the booth with her heart still racing. She reached for her face–it felt the same. She looked at her hand–it looked the same. Of course. She ought to have known better than anyone else that it would.

She stood for a moment, looking at the green and gold plains, the blue sky, feeling beyond anger and beyond gratitude. Could she get herself back into the booth? If so, she was free. To visit Paris after all these years, see Antarctica, discuss things with Seth. If not, well, she was trapped in a place she liked far better.

She reached deep in herself, feeling for any subtle difference, for anything lost. But she could find no absence, and she supposed sadly that there was none. Then just as sadly, she realized that if something was gone, it was something so intangible, so ethereal, that she'd never be aware of its loss.

AUTUMN SUNSHINE FOR MOE JOOST
by John Morressy

The author lives in New Hampshire with his wife, a woman of Promethean patience, and their two fat, good-natured cats. Mr. Morressy writes, teaches, and spends a good deal of his time playing woodsman, farmer, electrician, carpenter, and general handyman. He's written nine SF books in the past seven years, is now just finishing up a big, fat fantasy adventure novel, and is looking forward to a big, fat science fiction novel. But there will also be short stories, from time to time.

Moe Joost, one of the early giants of science fiction, is all but forgotten now. And yet Moe was one of the true greats. Even in those days of a-quarter-of-a-cent-a-word-payable-upon-appearance-with-a-loaded-gun, Moe was totally dedicated to his work. He was a true artist; a genuine innovator, always on the lookout for some new technique to try in a story.

It was Moe Joost who first had the idea of writing a novel from the point of view of an alien being. As he mulled over the idea, it became clear to him that the only artistically proper way to tell the story was to write it in the alien's own language. This was a titanic challenge, but Moe was ready to face it.

First he had to create a non-human language. Then he had to become fluent in it. Then, having learned language and script, he had to develop a writing style of his own in the new language. This all took time.

Moe set everything else aside and worked for eight years to produce a first draft. With scarcely a break, he set to work polishing and revising the manuscript to his satisfaction. He spent an additional six years doing this. In all the time he was working on the book, he wrote nothing else.

At last, worn out from his long labor, Moe sent the manuscript to his agent. The agent sent it back by return mail and promptly retired, leaving no forwarding address.

Moe tried nineteen other agents, with the same results.

By now, obsessed with his project, Moe began to send the book around on his own. After sixty-eight publishers had turned it down, all of them with an insulting letter of rejection, Moe, his faith unshaken, had the book privately published.

It sold four copies. Three were later returned.

Moe took to his bed and stayed there for a week. At the end of that time he rose, burned all his papers, smashed his typewriter, and took up chicken farming. He never wrote another word.

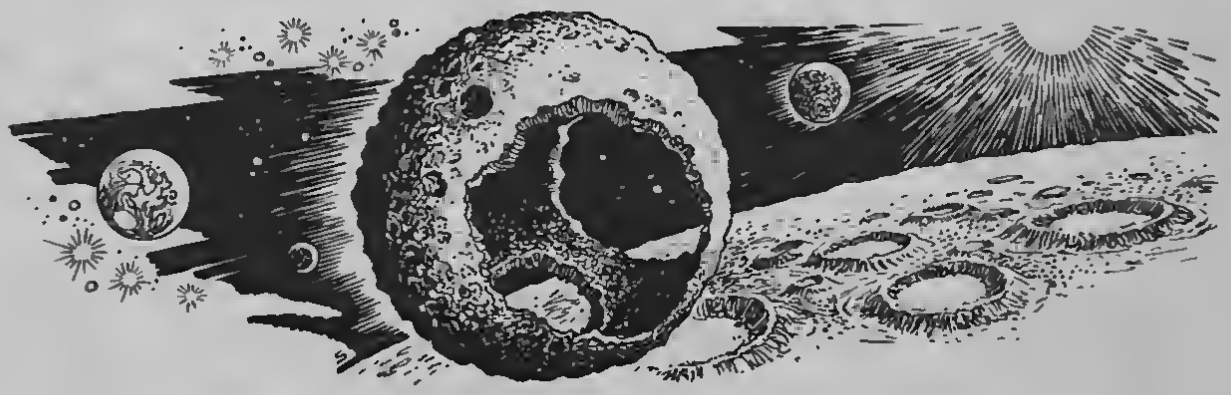
Author and book were forgotten for nearly thirty years. Then an editor who had chanced upon the only copy in circulation called Moe's home and made a very generous offer for rights to the book. Moe, astonished, accepted at once, and a deal was made.

The novel in an alien language known only to Moe Joost is now in its nineteenth printing. The title has been changed, and the author's name does not appear on the cover, but Moe has no regrets. His new publishers, Kant and Jargin (one of the biggest in the field), insist that it's the most successful textbook in Educational Administration that they've ever published.

THE SAPPHIRE AS BIG AS THE MARSPORT HILTON

by John M. Ford

art: Alex Schomburg



Variation on a theme by F. Scott Fitzgerald: Can you have a fortune so big you literally *don't know what to do with it? The author's new lodgings front upon a long, narrow, high-walled and treacherous access road, which he and his friends refer to as the Death Star Trench.*

Rampian and McKee stood on the edge of the crater, shielding their eyes from the brilliance within and trying to maintain their light foothold on the rock rim. Asteroids were lonely places, and quite often deadly places as well. The zap pistols clipped to their suits and the rapid-rifle aboard their crawler were small comfort; they were perfectly capable of jumping right off the world. And the Sun, while as bright as on Rampian's Mars or McKee's Vesta, was so very far away. . . .

Being rich was helping. And the thing at the bottom of the crater was going to make them both very rich indeed.

If they could only figure out, now, what it was *doing* there.

The crater was about a kilometer and a half wide; all of RM-3, as they called it until a better name came along, was only ten times that. That part waasn't unusual; in fact, it made some sort of sense, given the crazily skewed orbit of the rock, that some other rock had hit it hard a long, long time ago.

But meteors, even very fortunate ones, do not smooth out the craters they leave, and then line the dish with metal mirrors. Someone had made the crater into an enormous parabolic reflector. Even through suit visors twisted to full opacity the glare hurt the miners' eyes.

Or—as Rampian had pointed out very, *very* quietly—some*thing* had. Because RM-3 had not been near any human habitation in a long time. A lot longer than the rock-blockers had been looking for skystone gold.

And even—as McKee had said in a calm, sane voice—if one of the rock-blockers at Vesta Village had done this as a practical joke (one on a par with building a railroad all the way around Phobos, like Hembersmith-Byrne did) none of them would have put that . . . thing . . . at the center.

The light was worst there, where the acres of polished metal focused the sun's rays. And standing in the focal point, refracting the light, glowing violet, was a column of pure crystal sapphire ten meters wide and a hundred high. Very pure sapphire. Incredibly pure. Pure enough and big enough to cut hundreds and hundreds of ship windows and superopticals and jewel bearings, for which thank the Scatterer of the Asteroids the market couldn't be saturated, and to make Rampian and McKee rich rockfolk righteously.

"But what's it doing—" McKee began.

"Of course I know, McKee," Rampian said, "I'm just keeping it a secret from you."

"Aw, I'm sorry." He looked down at the crystal again and winced.

It was at least, he thought, the wince of a wealthy man. "Shall we sleep on it, Rampian?"

"All right, McKee," she replied.

Rampian sat straight up in bed. It was an outpost bed, and McKee hit the floor. "Zone refining!" she shouted.

"You've gone mad with wealth," said McKee, who was blinded and muffled in the foilfoam blanket. "You've turned off the lights and the life support and left me to die. I always knew either you or Joshua would."

"The very top of the crystal melts, and all the impurities dissolve," Rampian went on, practically singing. "Then, as the rock swings along this crazy orbit, the focal point slides down it; and the impurities, suspended in the molten zone, slide down too."

"Slide? Indeed you will. Those who murder for riches are on a greased track to the pits of Gehenna." Which they both favored for relaxation when visiting Phobostown. "Although I'm glad it's you. Joshua would have lacked the overtones of *Liebestod.*"

"But, count on the Scatterer's fingers, look at the time scale for the thing. A thousand years? Five thousand?"

"No amount of bloodstained stones can buy you immortality!"

"McKee, will you shut up and listen to me?"

McKee emerged from beneath the blanket clutching the number cruncher. Its display made little red flares in his eyes. "Six thousand two hundred years, give or take a sunspot cycle," he said. "Aw, c'mon, gold's in the stone for a long time too."

His silly grin proved infectious.

Joshua didn't exactly disorder space to reach RM-3, or Diamond Solitaire, as they figured on calling it. Not that he didn't know the bigness of the find—the words "housemaid's knee" in the bleepogram told him that—but if you hurry anywhere out among the rocks somebody will probably hurry after you.

"It's beautiful," Joshua said, not crying because it gets salt in your helmet mike, "as beautiful as Earth, and probably worth more money. The diamond as big as the Ritz."

"What?" said Rampian and McKee.

"It's a book," Joshua explained, and that was that. "But what in the name of the Scatterer's hangman is it *doing*—"

"Oh, shut up," said Rampian. "We've got enough to show you. The grooves where they hung on thrusters to move the rock into place, and the melted troughs where they laid power cords up here, and

something McKee thinks is a message to future generations—"

"Rampian thinks it's a builder's trademark," said McKee in a hurt tone.

"Whatever it is," said Joshua, simultaneously trying to look away from the light and at the crystal, "whoever set this whole thing up to make that lovely stone must not have needed it in much of a hurry."

"That occurred to us early on," said McKee.

"To *me*," said Rampian.

"After all," McKee went on, "what lasts six thousand two hundred years, plus the time to write up the ownership papers and deliver the thing to your friendly great big jewelry store? People sure don't."

"People didn't make it," Rampian said, "and I'm starting to think that love isn't forever either."

"A civilization just might, though," said Joshua, who having read some books in his time knew what civilizations had been. "And what do civilizations do?"

"Elect politicians."

"Raise taxes."

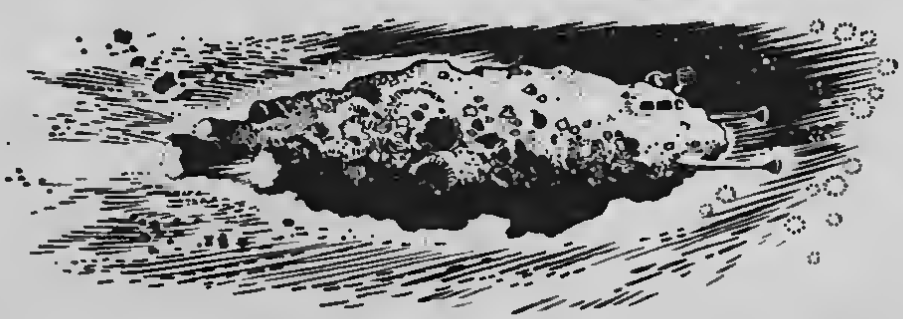
"Make—oh Scatterer drop me hard. Rampian, you get on the bleeper and you raise us somebody to cut this thing up. Discreet would be nice but fast would be better.

"McKee, you take the number cruncher and the Universal Star Sheets, and you locate me the last six thousand years' worth of supernovas, and then you plot a course between 'em."

Then everybody realized at once just how much like the little crystals that made their laser pistols lase that *really huge* crystal out there was—and how for anybody who could push asteroids around like pitching pebbles, building an exciter coil that big would be playing with strings and toothpicks.

They looked up at the Sun, which suddenly did not seem bright at all; they were thinking about a whole different order of brightness.

And Joshua said, "Civilizations make war."



SHARING TIME IN THE GALLERY

by Sharon Webb

art: Alex Schomburg

The author tells us that she has sold a motley assortment of light verse, humor features, mysteries, and fantasy. Mrs. Webb admits to playing a pretty good guitar and a pretty awful banjo. She has a husband, three daughters, and a house full of reference books. In addition to the usual pets, they used to have a bat, but it went away.

Martin Crewmaster stepped up to the door of Ll'Hh Gallery one block off Chattatlanta's Embassy Row. He clutched a painting in a carrying tube. Though the weather was cool, sour sweat drained from his armpits—the painting was a fake.

The Ll'Hh were supposed to be telepaths weren't they? Damned Aliens. He'd better fog. He began a sing-song chant in his brain, a nursery rhyme from his babyhood twenty-eight years ago:

Otto Marshall Stepan Shea
Went to Mars as a stowaway.
Jumped in the sea at the highest tide,
Drank so much sand that he petrified.

The door to the gallery whooshed open.

Martin found himself in a medium-sized room covered with fuzzy brown on floor and walls. In one corner of the room stood what Martin could relate to as a cactus. Not your ordinary, everyday cactus, but essence of cactus. A massive desk floated on spindly, gravity-defying legs in the center of the room. Behind the desk on one of the three chairs in the room lay a crumpled suit of some kind. It seemed to be made of plastiline.

Not an Alie in sight.

Feeling a little braver, Martin walked up to the desk and looked things over. Nothing much there except a small sign that read:

CREATIVITY IN ALL THINGS

and a series of recessed holes that seemed to be a control panel.

He took a closer look at the plastiline suit. With recognition came a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Damned Alies."

Martin had never met an Alie. Never, in fact, had he even seen one. After all, there weren't too many around—just in the embassies and the handful of imp-exp shops that circled them like satellites. It went against the grain to seek them out, but what choice did he have? His grant ran out next month at about the time his rent came due. He'd only sold two paintings in the last two years—and those for a pittance, but if he could pull off this deal he'd be set for a while. He wasn't fool enough to believe the Alies would pay handsomely for an original Crewmaster, but an original old-master—*caveat emptor.*

He looked at the plastiline suit again with a little shiver of revulsion. It registered in his mind as "human-suit"—a grotesque, deflated balloon with empty eye-sockets, limp melting features,

and flabby limbs. Then he noticed a small sign on the desk next to one of the buttons:

PRESS FOR ENTRY

He did.

The air next to the human-suit thickened.

Otto Marshall Stepan Shea

Went to Mars . . .

The thickened air took on a bluish sheen.

Jumped in the sea at the highest tide . . .

Blue-smoke poured into the eye-sockets of the human-suit.

Otto Marshall Stepan Shea,

Ohgod, ohgod . . .

The human-suit inflated to humanoid proportions. Blue smoke shifted within the eye sockets. A speaker in the throat whirred and activated, "I am Kk'l'k [a purr ending in a glottal stop] Ll'Hh [a musical note rising a fifth in pitch.]"

Martin wrapped his tongue awkwardly around the syllables, "Mr. Uhl-Hah."

Otto Marshall Stepan . . .

"I understand you buy pictures. I have something I think might interest you." Sweat dripped from his armpits. He felt chilled. He couldn't take his eyes off the shifting, smoky eye-sockets. "You *do* buy pictures, don't you?"

"We buy lessons-learned that we motivate toward," said the alien. "You would call them pictures." A rubbery finger moved and pressed a button on the desk panel. "I have summoned our resident artist. He is a supreme motivator, and I value his judgement."

"Motivator?"

The plastiline head nodded gravely. "Creativity is, as you must know, a composite of lesson-learned and motivation toward."

A blank look passed over Martin's face. He felt like that character out of Medieval Lit., Alice at the mad tea-party. "Of course," he bluffed.

Blue smoke shifted rapidly within the eye-sockets. "Forgive," sighed the alien. "Forgive, please. Your reference to tea-parties indicates incomprehension. Forgive, please."

He'd been scanned. God.

Jumped in the sea at the highest tide,

Drank so much sand that he petrified.

A passage at one end of the room opened. An identical human-suit shuffled into the room. It spoke, "I am Vv'l'ng Ll'Hh."

The first alien said, "Vv'l'ng perhaps can better explain to you what we mean."

The second alien settled in a chair with such force that two streams of smoke spewed out of its eye-holes at impact—two smoke-rings that were immediately sucked back into the blank sockets.

Martin resisted a terrible desire to snicker. If he gave in, he knew that the end result would be stark raving hysteria. The image of Alice and the Mad Hatter—or was it the Mad Hare?—rose again. Did the Alies wear human-suits when humans weren't around? Sleep in them maybe? How about in the shower? Something between nausea and a belly-laugh formed in his stomach and he fought to keep it down. Somehow he realized that the Ll'Hh wore their funny suits to make people like him more at ease. And somehow that made it worse.

The first alien said, "We wear whatever cloth is needed for the work we do. Sometimes we wear nothing at all."

Jesus—Buddha! *Stepan Shea* . . .

"To explain creativity," said the second alien, "imagine that you are walking through your Earth woodlands and you hear a creature you call a wood-thrush sing."

Martin had never walked in the woods, but he nodded—queasily.

"You perceive the song, and you understand its significance. That is the lesson-learned."

"The idea?"

The two aliens faced one another, then turned back to Martin and nodded. The first said, "In a manner of speaking."

The second added, "This is a seed of creativity. In order for the seed to sprout and bear fruit, one must motivate toward."

Back to the mad tea-party.

"One being must move another toward the same experience."

"Like a recording?" Martin was convinced all Alies were nuts.

"Your reference to 'recording' is not wrong as far as it goes, but you must understand that this experience is not a simple listening to the song of the thrush. Rather a new essence flows. The song must be heard, the damp woods felt, the odor of musty leaves smelled. One must taste the spring breeze; feel the springy moss under the feet. The more toward perfection the sharing becomes then the more perfect the creativity involved."

Martin blinked in surprise. What those crazy Alies were talking about was carbon copies. Copies. Well, did he have a copy for

them! Fog it. . . .

Otto Marshall Stepan Shea . . .

He let his mind sing-song away the incriminating thoughts. Then he said, "I believe the picture I am offering you is exactly what you want. Let me show you." He opened the carrying tube and took out the canvas, unrolling it carefully. It was a good forgery. Masterful really. He had used aged canvas—he'd spent plenty for it, and he'd painted it with real acrylics. Spent a month antiquing it too.

"This is a genuine old-master from the twentieth century." He spread the canvas on the desk in front of the aliens. "A Keith. One of the foremost examples of advertising art of that era. A real Keith—" *Forgery . . .*

Went to Mars as a stowaway . . .

"A masterpiece by the master of subliminal advertising."

The painting was a graphic picture of a glass filled with ice cubes and an amber liquid. "Bourbon," said Martin. "A type of alcohol very popular back then." Icy condensation frosted the glass and dripped down the sides.

He let them take it in, then he pointed to one of the ice cubes. "Watch." He began to trace the outline, then stopped. What if they couldn't see it—couldn't *really* see it? He stared into the pairs of blank eye-sockets in sudden despair.

"We see," answered Kk'l'k.

Relieved, he began to trace again. "Watch. Do you see the outlines of a man's back?"

The aliens nodded.

He showed them the figure cleverly hidden in the lines of the painted ice cubes—a man, naked, floating in a fetal position face-down in the liquor, drowning his sorrows—the motif. Then, more subtle, in the arcane depths of the bourbon the outline of a woman appeared, full-breasted, open, swimming with tawny sea-serpents. The stuff of dreams.

Martin waited expectantly.

The aliens sat, silent, smoke drifting hypnotically within empty eyes.

The silence lengthened.

"Do you want my picture?" he asked uneasily.

Kk'l'k said, "We need time to deliberate on your offering."

Vv'l'ng said, "While we are deliberating, perhaps you would like to see our gallery?"

There was nothing Martin wanted more than to get away from

the human-suits for a few minutes. "I'd be pleased."

Kk'l'k pressed a button with a doughy finger, and a section of wall behind the desk swung away. The two aliens rose unsteadily. Martin followed them into a large empty room. There was nothing in it at all. No pictures. Nothing but a series of shimmering gray panels against the walls.

Kk'l'k said, "It is best if you start with this one."

Martin stared at the panel the alien had indicated. Above it, he noticed a legend:

METAMORPHOSIS ON Ll'Hh

"Step inside," urged Vv'l'ng.

The panel gave way as Martin moved through it. . . . He/she perched on a white cliff overlooking a yellow sea, and stretched out fiery wings.

It was evening. The Fire Bird had burst forth from her mother that dawn—sentient, aware that she had but a single day and night. The day was dying, but the night remained—the glorious night. She spread her flaming wings and exulted. Streamers of fire danced from her wing-tips. She took to the air as the sky faded into gray, then into satin black pierced with a million stars.

Unleashing her energies, she sang of her birth and the magnitude of her life, screaming like a rocket across the night sky, tracing hidden languages in fiery script across the heavens, swooping low to kiss the phosphorescent sea. As the night aged, she felt the new life stir within her and she rejoiced. All went on. All was good.

At the first shimmering glints of dawn, she came to roost and laboring brought forth her issue. When she saw it, a great shriek tore from her throat as though all the winds of the yellow sea converged there. It was crippled. Tiny charred stubs fluttered where there should be wings. Never would it rise and feel the air currents caress it.

Gently, tenderly, the Fire Bird lifted her young. One last time, with untold effort, she took to the air, bearing the little crippled one aloft. She rose higher and higher, wings pulsing painfully. The white cliffs below became a speck. Far above the yellow sea she released the little one, grieving for it. It fell, glowing like a tiny meteor, into the sea below.

Throbbing with grief, the Fire Bird glided on dying wings to the roosting place on the white cliffs. She was the end of her line.

A light going out, the Fire Bird died, her body nothing now but blackening coals and a wispy trail of smoke.

The smoke curled. It was very young and it was, it decided, afraid. Though it had no voice, it screamed.

Far away someone heard.

"This one next," suggested Kk'l'k.

Staggering, Martin lurched toward a luminous panel in the gallery. The legend above it read:

CAPTURE

He fell through the panel. The white cliffs again . . . He/it bleated voicelessly.

Far away someone heard.

The wispy smoke-creature curled above the charred remains of its birth. It gathered itself together and tried to think, but it was afraid and alone. The rays of a giant sun pierced its essence. Winds from the yellow sea buffeted it and tore it to wispy fragments that regrouped without effort.

In the distance a tiny dot grew and became a translucent giant bubble that navigated sea winds. Within, drawing near to the white cliffs, floated the smoky guardians of Ll'Hh, surrounded by their balloon of capture-cloth.

The creature trembled, rose, and drifted away.

The thought came strong, "Stay, wild youth."

Afraid, it hesitated for a moment, then started to flee.

"Rash infant."

It hesitated again.

A portion of the balloon opened. Inside, swirling smoke beckoned hypnotically. A gentle thought goaded it—"Come inside to mother."

Trembling, it moved toward the opening, paused, then was drawn inside.

Inside were denser, larger replicas of itself. Confused, frightened at its sudden confinement, it bleated its fear and pressed itself against the billowing walls of the capture-cloth.

Slowly, very slowly, it was comforted.

Still bleating wordlessly, Martin slowly began to focus on the vacant hall of the gallery.

"Now this one," suggested Vv'l'ng.

The legend above the panel read:

TRAINING

Martin stepped through. . . . He tried to concentrate because it was expected, but his mind wandered. It was tiresome having to

wear learning-cloth. He'd rather wear music-cloth and drift within soft reeds and make the Ff'Ll-Lh sing. He'd rather wear nothing at all. Outside a warm wind whispered to him, luring him. He could let it carry him to the mountains. He bet he could stretch himself from the summit of Ll'Hh 9 all the way to the peak of Ll'Hh 17 with some left over. He bet he could stretch from here to the moons and back and maybe farther. He bet—

Something beat relentlessly against his mind. The teachers. He turned his thoughts back to the lesson. The Mother-of-Crystal egg lay before him. He touched it with learning-cloth feelers, turning it over and over. It glowed dully, then brighter. A seam opened along one side. Then—oh wonderful, a tiny glowing needle of crystal grew and blossomed into intricate, faceted rays. He felt delight.

He felt more delight from his teachers. The thought came, "You have learned a beautiful lesson. Now you must motivate others toward your lesson."

He tried. He duplicated the Mother-of-Crystal egg. It glowed dully—then lay lifelessly. The warm winds of Ll'Hh sang to him.

"Try again," came the thought.

He thought rebellion at his teachers.

The teachers' thoughts were sterner now. "You must try again."

The senior teacher sent the thought, "How else can you expect to send understanding thoughout the stars?"

The junior teacher sent the platitude, "Creativity in all things."

He tried again. He duplicated the Mother-of-Crystal egg. It glowed dully—then brightened. It changed from egg-shape to spheroid and began to roll away. It rolled faster and faster. A seam opened along one side and tiny rubberoid legs emerged and skidded it to a stop.

"No, no," scolded the junior teacher.

"Wait," answered the senior. "He's learning. Perhaps he will be a humorist. There are worse things."

Outside the learning-cloth the warm wind blew. He bet he could stretch through the whole universe. He knew he could if he tried.

"I could try. I will try," said Martin.

"Of course," answered Vv'l'ng.

"We have decided to buy your picture," said Kk'l'k. "We believe this amount will be adequate." He handed Martin a draft for 90,000 credits.

Ninety thousand! Martin fingered the draft, disbelief on his

face. Then the memory of the panels flooded back. *That* was art. He felt shame burn through him, flushing his face to a burning scarlet. Without trying to fog, he thought, "It's a fake. The picture is a fake."

"On the contrary," said Vv'l'ng. "We believe it is quite genuine."

Bewildered, clutching the draft, Martin handed the aliens the carrying tube and the picture, turned, and stepped outside into the bright sunlight. Maybe, with a lot of work, maybe *he* could capture something of what he'd seen. Maybe.

Inside, Kk'l'k dropped the painting and carrying case into the Dispose-a-Chute. He deplored the waste, but it would have been unthinkable to refuse Martin's gift. The vapor that was Kk'l'k roiled out from the eye-sockets of the human-suit that sank in empty wrinkles on the chair behind the desk.

"The picture is ready," said Vv'l'ng the motivator.

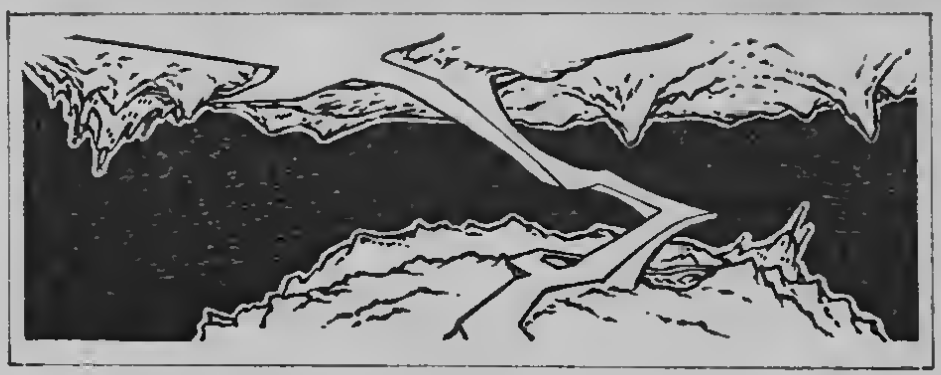
"Good," thought Kk'l'k. "It was a nice touch, wasn't it—the nursery rhymes. Whimsical." The title above the panel read:

THE LESSON-LEARNED BY MARTIN CREWMASTER, EARTH

Kk'l'k floated through the shimmering panel and . . . stepped up to the door of Ll'Hh Gallery one block off Chattatlanta's Embassy Row. He clutched a painting in a carrying tube. Though the weather was cool, sour sweat drained from his armpits—the painting was a fake.

The Ll'Hh were supposed to be telepaths weren't they? Damned Aliens. He'd better fog. He began a sing-song chant in his brain; a nursery rhyme from his babyhood twenty-eight years ago:

Otto Marshall Stepan Shea . . .



ON THE MIDWATCH

by Keith Minnion

art: Keith Minnion

Ensign Minnion won't say that what happens on the midwatch described in this story ever happened on any bridge midwatch he's ever stood on **his** *ship, but . . .*

The words felt good, coming out. Like putting on the new silver-bar collar devices; like the new glowing gold half-stripes on his service-dress blues, sewn next to his tarnished ensign stripes: you're a Lieutenant Junior Grade, Charley-boy, he thought. You're fresh from the Pacific Fleet, and tonight you are a Lieutenant (jg) Officer of the Deck underway, just you, only you, your first solo watch since reporting on board without a full lieutenant or lieutenant commander hanging on your elbow, hanging on your every word, on your every move.They're all asleep, now, trusting you, up here.The ship is yours, Charley-boy, *yours*.

"Attention in the pilothouse," were the words; "this is Lieutenant (jg) Midwich. I have the deck and the con."

"Aye aye, sir," was the bridge crew's rote chorused reply.

Then: "Steady on 350, sir," from the helmsman.

And, from the lee helm: "All engines ahead standard, sir, zero seven five revolutions indicated for fifteen knots."

"Very well." And those words felt good too. Navy tradition: as OOD he was the only one on the bridge with the authority to say them, the only goddamn one. But hey, let's not let this go to your head, Charley, he thought. Calm down, boy.This is the midwatch, midnight to four, steaming alone in the middle of the cold, cold North Atlantic (remember those warm tropical breezes?) hundreds of miles from any commercial shipping lanes, from any land, from any possible danger. But *still*: you're the OOD; the ship is your total responsibility; the Captain is sawing wood right now, knowing you're up here. Don't get too cocky, please; and for God's sake, *don't screw up*.

He smiled anyway. In the red darkness of the bridge, he could hide the smile in a shadow. Goddammit, he could handle the responsibility; Goddammit, he felt *good*.

Charley surveyed the bridge—

to the quartermasters, parallel-rulers in their hands, hunched over their charts; to the status-board keeper, crowned with sound-powered headphones, standing ready; to the helmsman, his eyes locked on the gyro-repeater in the panel before him, his hands caressing the wheel; to the lee-helm, turned to the engineering status-board, transcribing a report from main control over his own set of sound-powered phones; to the boatswainsmate-of-the-watch, brewing coffee in the corner, keeping his eye on his messengers; and to Al Douglass, his Junior Officer of the Deck, stooped over the radar-repeater scope, its rubber glare-shield cone molded to his face

—then looked out into the darkness, to where the black starfield blended into the deeper, smoother darkness of the midnight sea, out, miles and miles beyond the ghostly crescent bow.

How far are we pinging, Al?"

"Fifty thousand yards, sir. I was thinking of bringing it in, though. Keep CIC at fifty?"

"Yeah. Sounds good."

Al pulled his face from the rubber; green light filtered up, into the overhead; he went to the 21MC, bent, and talked quietly to the operations crew in the Combat Information Center, the tenders of the heavy electronics and sensors, the only true eyes for the ship in this darkness, in a night this complete.Then he straightened. "CIC watch officer says he's got one scope at fifty, and another at eighty. Air-search radar is down again, of course. Sonar is on standby. Fifty and eighty okay?"

Charley nodded. No harm. No need to have everything done exactly to his specifications.He was the newest officer on board, in no position to make waves (ugh; no pun intended *there,* please).He needed to be flexible. *Bend,* Charley-boy. *Give* a little. It's the mark of a good OOD, to be sure.

"Sir?"

Out of the darkness, the boatswainsmate-of-the-watch, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand.

Thanks, Boats." Charley took the mug, warmth spreading through his fingers . . . both bridge-wing hatches were closed and dogged; outside, on the wings, both the lookouts were (no doubt) freezing their *asses* off. . . .

A squawk from the 21MC, then: "Bridge, Combat."

Charley cocked his head in the general direction; Al took it. "Bridge aye," he said, finger pressing the send/receive toggle.

"Yes sir. We've got a contact, seventy-eight thousand yards, bearing 342."

That one'll be Alpha," Charley said, taking a quick gulp of coffee, burning his tongue, then putting the mug down.Take it *easy,* he thought. It's *thirty-nine miles out,* for God's sake.

"Designate it skunk Alpha, Combat," Al said.

"Combat aye."

"It's probably the *Glover* on local ops." Charley turned to the status-board keeper. "You get that designation, Willoughby?"

"Yes sir, skunk Alpha."

Tell CIC I want five minute marks, and a CPA as soon as she tracks."

"Yes sir." And Willoughby turned to murmur into his sound-powered phones.

Al already had his binoculars up, looking vainly to port.

"I doubt you'll get her visually, Mr. Douglass; she's over the horizon."

The JOOD grinned, his expression sheepish. "I guess I'm a little anxious, sir."

Sir. Al was an ensign; the only time (the *only* time) ensigns called j.g.'s "sir" was on the bridge. A rare fruit, Charley savored it.

He checked the center-line gyro-repeater. Yes, indeed, steady on 350. You should have checked that before, Charley-boy, when you first took the watch. *Watch* yourself; do it *right*.He leaned on the repeater, staring out into the night, hoping he looked calm, collected, professional.They're all looking to you, Charley. You've got to be on top of it. You've *got* to.

Willoughby spoke up then: "Combat's got another skunk, sir."

"Where is it?"

"290, at thirty-five thousand."

Charley turned. "Did you say *thirty*-five?"

"Yes sir, thirty-five thousand yards." Willoughby paused, listening to his phones. They say it just popped up," he said then.

Charley let out his breath slowly. "Okay, designate it Bravo. Three minute marks, Closest Point of Approach when it tracks." And turned to Al, who was bent over the radar repeater once again. "Got it, Mr. Douglass?"

"Yes sir. It's coming in pretty fast."

"Low-flying aircraft, maybe?"

"No, it's not painting right for that. I'm pretty sure it's a surface vessel. I can give you a rough CPA on Alpha now, anyway, if you want."

"Yeah."

"It's got a healthy left bearing drift, CPA at twenty-five thousand at about 270 relative in about ten minutes."

Charley nodded. "Willoughby, check that off Combat's figures. Tell them to put Alpha on watch after it hits CPA."

"Yes sir."

"Bravo's really moving," Al said, face to the rubber shield, adjusting the repeater's controls. "I've got her at a constant bearing, decreasing range now."

Charley's heart jumped. How far?"

"She's in five thousand already." Al looked up, his eyes wide, rimmed with green. That's *fast*."

Charley glanced out into the darkness, then crouched by the 21MC. "Combat, Bridge," he said quietly.

"Combat aye."

"What's the story on Bravo?"

A pause, then: "We've got her on CBDR, sir, collision course. She's really coming in."

"You've got a real-speed on her?"

". . . yes, sir." Another pause. "Forty-eight knots, sir."

"*Forty*—!"

"We checked it three times, sir. We even got the Senior-chief out of his rack for this one."

"My apologies for the Senior-chief's loss of beauty sleep.Tell him to check it again."

Forty-eight knots. What kind of a ship could go that fast?

"Al. . . ?"

Who shrugged, his eyes on the black horizon line to port. "Surface-effect craft, maybe. Maybe a hydrofoil."

"In the middle of the goddamned North Atlantic?"

Al shrugged again. "Russian secret weapon? Loch Ness monster?"

Charley stood, brought up his binoculars and swept the port horizon from beam to brow. "Get back on the scope, Al, and let me know when Bravo gets in to twelve thousand. We'll probably come right 20 or 30 degrees to stay clear of it and Alpha."

"Yes sir."

Charley turned. "Mark your helm, Barney."

"350 still, sir; steady on."

"Very well."

"Alpha's turned right, sir," Al said then, from the repeater scope. "I've got her past CPA now, and opening."

"Good." Go *away,* Charley thought. I'd rather have these skunks one at a time *any* day. "Willoughby, tell Combat to put Alpha on watch."

"Aye sir, watch skunk Alpha."

"Bravo, Al?"

"Fifteen thousand and closing. Dead on collision course still."

Charley aimed his binoculars in the direction of the contact.He relaxed his eyes, looking for it at the edges of his lines of sight . . . *there!* A flash, gone, then back . . . a yellowish, orangish light . . . dancing through the waves on the horizon . . .

He brought his binoculars down. "Boatswainsmate-of-the-Watch!"

"Yes sir."

"Go out and tell the port lookout to wake his ass up; I've got this

skunk visually in here and I haven't heard a word from him. It's *his* job to sight these damn things first."

"Yes sir."

"Al?"

"Almost twelve thousand, sir. It . . . wait a minute, just lost it on that sweep . . ."

Charley swung his binoculars up again. Where was it? It had just been . . .

Three sweeps, sir. Bravo's gone from my scope."

Charley focused in and out, looked from side to side . . . "Keep your ass on that radar, Al. We—"

"Combat just lost skunk Bravo, sir," Willoughby said.

Squawk: "Bridge, Combat."

Charley stooped, pressed the toggle. "Bridge aye."

"Yes, sir. We're damned if we know what's going on out there."

"Sub, maybe?"

"At forty-plus knots, sir?"

Charley colored. Can anyone see me in the dark? Can anyone— "Bridge aye," Charley said, lifting the toggle. And straightened. "Boats, send someone with a pair of binoculars back to the fantail. Get them hooked up with the wing look-outs and the 21MC in here."

"Yes sir."

"Scope's clean, sir," Al said, looking up.

Charley shook his head. "Skunks never acted like this in the Pacific, I can tell you that."

Al grinned. "You'll get used to it. Wait till we get up into the northern-corridor shipping-lanes. Then you'll really pull your hair out."

Charley rubbed his eyes. "Can't wait. Listen, you'd better—"

The port wing hatch clanged open. "There's something out here!" The lookout yelled into the pilothouse. "Jesus *Christ* there's something *out here!*"

Charley pushed past him ("Take *care* of this asshole," he mouthed to Al) and stepped out onto the bridge wing.

It was a beam of light, long, straight, rotating like a lighthouse beam, was actually more than one, was a succession of beams, like the spokes of a cyctopean *wheel* . . .

Al came up behind him. "Christ Almighty," he breathed. "That light is *under* the water."

And so it was. Yellowed by depth, casting innumerable fish-shadows as the impossibly powerful beams swung past . . .

"What kind of light can penetrate that much ocean and still keep

its intensity?" Al said. "Those beams have got to be *miles* long . . ."

Charley suddenly realized his mouth was open. He closed it, grabbed the pelorus and took a bearing on where the 'hub' of the light spokes appeared to be.

"290, sir?"

"Yeah, 290. Go wake the Captain. This is crazy."

They both re-entered the pilothouse in time to hear the helmsman say shakily: "—that ain't no damned bear sub . . . ain't no damn way that's a bear sub—"

"Quiet on the bridge, Barney," Charley said then, amazed that his own voice was still steady.

Piinnggg. Piinngggg. Piinngggg.

"*What the hell—*"

"Combat put the sonar on the line, sir," Willoughby said. "They figured you'd want it on."

"Oh." **Piinnggg.** "Yeah." **Piinngggg.** "How's it painting?"

"Huge, sir. They say that whatever's out there is pretty goddamn huge. Four thousand yards out. Senior-chief's on the scope. He—"

"Captain's on the Bridge!" Barney sang out. A hatch slammed.

"Who's got the deck?"

"I do, sir," Charley said.

"Mr. Midwich?" The Captain squinted. "Excuse me, I don't have my night vision yet. What have we—?"

Piinngggg. Piinngggg.

"Tell CIC to turn off the sonar, Willoughby," the Captain said then. "We'll end up waking the whole damned ship." He went to the bridge windows. "Ahah," he said.

"Sir," Charley began. "It's—"

It had surfaced. It was a black mountain, rimmed with orange light. There was movement across its surface, *things* scurrying to and fro . . . there was the sound of horns, of a huge cathedral organ in an all-encompassing ear-blasting dischord, vibrating the Bridge window glass . . .

"Right full rudder, helmsman," the Captain said, calmly, through the sound. "Steady on 090."

"Right full rudder, steady on 090 aye, sir," Barney said, his voice thick. The bridge was silent, then, the sudden quiet a thunderclap; the ship turned, heeling slightly, shushing through the water. Then: "My rudder is right full . . . steady on 090, sir."

"Very well." The Captain sighed. "Mr. Midwich, what is she turning?"

"Uhh . . . zero seven five, sir. Fifteen knots."

"Lee helm," the Captain said, "all engines ahead full; indicate zero nine seven revolutions for twenty knots."

"All engines ahead full; aye, sir, indicating zero nine seven revolutions for twenty knots." The engine order telegraph rang up speed brassily. The lee helm said: "Zero nine seven revolutions indicated and answered for, sir, for twenty knots."

The Captain nodded. "Very well." Then, "Mr. Midwich, call your relief. Mr. Douglass, you'll have the deck and the con."

Charley was astonished, bewildered, in shock. He pointed out the bridge windows to the thing in the waves tracking slowly to port, fading into the night; his mouth was open again, but no sound came out. . . .

"Mr. Midwich," the Captain said patiently, his eyes grey steel, "give the deck and the con to Mr. Douglass."

Charley swallowed. ". . . Attention in the pilothouse, this is Mr. Midwich. Ensign Douglass has the deck and the con."

"Aye aye, sir," the bridge team chorused, looking at one another in the red darkness.

"This is Ensign Douglass," Al said then, his voice a trifle high. "I have the deck and the con. Belay your reports."

"Aye aye, sir," the chorus repeated.

"Mr. Douglass," the Captain said, "when Mr. Midwich's relief comes up you are to give him the deck. You may keep the con, however, if you feel you're up to it."

"Yes sir." Al glanced helplessly to Charley. *I'm sorry,* his eyes said.

But Charley did not notice; he was still astonished, still bewildered, still in shock . . .

"Mr. Midwich, I will see you in my sea cabin in five minutes."

"Captain's off the Bridge!" Barney sang; the hatch clanged.

Charley turned to Al. "What. . . ?" He managed.

Al looked out the Bridge windows, then to Charley, then back to the windows. He was clutching his binoculars too tightly, Charley saw. White knuckles . . .

"Charley," he said faintly, "I didn't see anything. I heard about this; goddammit I *heard* about this . . , no, I didn't see anything, not a goddamned blessed thing. You're *new*, Charley, understand? You're *new.*"

But Charley was shaking his head, slowly, slowly . . .

"Call your relief, Charley," Al said then. "Quickly, please; I've never had the deck before. Okay?"

Charley looked at Willoughby, who turned to his status board; he

gave the pilothouse an all-embracing glance, but no one would meet his eyes. He turned to the hatch, yanking it open. "Midwich off the Bridge," he muttered. **Clang.**

KNOCK THEN ENTER

Charley knocked, then pushed the door open. The Captain looked up from his desk, from a pad covered with doodlings. "Yes, Mr. Midwich?"

"You said you wanted to see me, sir."

"See you? About what?"

"About what was . . . about what was out there . . . what I saw . . ."

"Saw? What did you see, Mr. Midwich? Was it something on your bridge watch?"

Charley looked into the Captain's eyes; they were steady, expressionless; in his fingers he twirled a pencil, around and around and . . .

"No, sir," he heard himself say.

"Oh?" Around and around and— "You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. I . . . I didn't see any—"

"Then there's really no need for this discussion, is there?"

"No, sir."

"Go hit your rack and get some sleep, then, Mr. Midwich."

"Yes sir. Goodnight, sir."

"Mr. Midwich."

Charley paused at the door. "Sir?"

"Was this your first OOD bridge watch?"

"On this ship, yes, sir."

"I see." The Captain began twirling his pencil again. "I think it's fair to say, then, that you've got some things to learn about how we do things around here."

"Sir?"

"Stay clear of the deck log, Mr. Midwich. I'll make your entries for you. Go below and get some midrats if you can't sleep. Goodnight." And he returned to his doodlings.

Charley closed the door then. Firmly.

Outside, on the main deck, leaning on the lifelines, staring into the wind-whipped darkness. Nothing there . . . twenty knot wake stirring the sea to yellow-green phosphorescence off the sharp-slicing bow . . .

There's nothing out there, he thought; there's nothing out there at all. Right? Right?

Knowing when to shut up makes a good officer, Charley-boy,

makes a damn good officer, you know. . . .

And then, out of the night, he heard the thundering organ dischord once more, gentled now with distance . . . and he started shaking.

THIS COULD NOT BE THE ALIEN

This could not be the alien.
He was not cruel enough.
He was not what the people expected,
  not what they wanted.

Marvel and *Startling* lied.
His eyes did not burn,
His touch did not kill.
He could not make things go away
  like M. Valentine Smith.

He splashed in the water.
He rolled in the grass.
His long slender fingers left no marks
  as they passed over this new world.

He was not what the people expected,
  not what they wanted.
He was not cruel enough.

—Charles West, Jr.

MOUNTAIN WINGS

by Sydney J. Van Scyoc

art: Ron Miller

The author originated in the Midwest, but after ten years in the San Francisco Bay area she considers herself a Californian. Mrs. Van Scyoc has a husband, a daughter, and a son; also three cats, two dogs, and about 112 houseplants. Her latest novel, Sunwaif, *will appear soon from Berkley/Putnam. "Mountain Wings" is the first short story the author has written in several years, and it made her realize how much she's missed doing short fiction. We hope she won't wait so long next time!*

Kirsa came awake at Geva's first touch and peered up sleepily from the cocooning warmth of her cape and woolen blanket. Daylight extended grey fingers through the crudely chinked walls of the mountain cabin. Outside the ewes had already begun to stir; she heard their plaintive morning bleats and the tick-tick of delicate hooves on the rocky soil. Kirsa sat and yawned, still wrapped in her cape. Her breath condensed before her in a dense fog. "Cold today," she observed.

"Cold as always, and harsh," Geva responded ritually. She huddled in her three-layered cape, her grey hair rough, her once blue eyes milky. "Daughter's daughter," she said anxiously, her gnarled hand touching Kirsa again, this time to communicate the measure of her reluctance. "The sounds we heard when the first moon rose—we must count the herd."

Reminded, Kirsa threw off the last vestiges of sleep. A faint frown scored her forehead. The sounds had been telling: the sough of heavy breath somewhere just beyond the cabin, the clatter of rock beneath stealthy feet, the surprised bleating of first one ewe, then another, followed by their shrilling cries of terror. Kirsa and Geva had driven the flock to the spring pasture just six days ago and they had lost three of thirty-eight ewes already.

Perhaps this time the predator had left some clue to his identity. Quickly Kirsa rose and whispered a morning prayer to the mountain whose stern power she already felt coursing up through the soles of her feet. This was her last year to come to Terlath's grassy slopes with the herd. She was fifteen now, and although she was slight, next year she would settle into the more skilled tasks of the women of the valley.

This was Geva's last year to feel the power of the mountain through the soles of her feet, too. She had followed Kirsa up the steep trail with visibly failing strength, pain often whitening her lips. Just four years before she had been a woman in her prime. Then the gnarling had come, thickening her joints and twisting her spine. Soon other organs of her body had begun to yield to age and hardship too. Kirsa knew that were her grandmother to push back the long sleeves of her woolen garment, the fiery red craters of killing-sores would glare from her shrunken arms. Geva ate ever more sparingly, gauging her dwindling appetite against the need to keep her strength through the summer. When they returned to the valley at the end of summer, she would eat no more. Instead she would seat herself by her daughter's hearth-fire and let her spirit slip from her body.

But now Geva studied Kirsa with silent concern. Kirsa stepped across the dim cabin to tear off a chunk of bread and to peel a shred of cheese from the big yellow wheel. These she divided, giving Geva half. "You must eat. If I go up to the crags for the ewe-killer, you will be alone with the herd. Bersh will bring ground-nuts as soon as they are dug and dried; there will be food for the entire season."

"No, daughter's daughter," Geva protested, trying to return her ration. But Kirsa evaded her, pushing out the heavy door. She paused just outside, drawing a deep breath and letting her spirits rise on the morning air. The sun, rising behind Terlath's many-cragged peak, threw pale spires of light against the grey dawn. Soon the golden spires would brighten into full daylight and the shadowy mountain would emerge as stern and solid rock. Even now, with shadow heavy upon the mountainside and the air sharp and chill, Kirsa felt the sustaining strength of the mountain all around her. Her eyes raised to the peaks, she offered a second prayer. As she murmured the well-learned words, her eyes automatically sought the peaks for silver wings.

She saw no silver flash high above the peaks. With a quick thought of her friends, gone to pasture with their own herds, Kirsa breathed relief. Then she ran around the cabin to count the flock.

Kirsa knew each individual ewe by her intricately patterned coat: black on white or grey on white. As she walked through the herd, the ewes dropped to their knees and scrubbed their frost-white forelocks against her ankles. Once, as a child, she had thought they worshipped her just as she worshipped the mountain. Then she had learned that instead they were scenting her ankles and feet with the discharge of minute glands located just above their tufted eyebrows, marking her as their keeper. Now, almost tripping on the possessive ewes, she flicked a stern hand at their woolen-clad rumps, scattering them.

By the time Geva picked her slow way around the cabin, Kirsa knew the worst. "Two more gone. And look."

Turning stiffly, Geva peered in the direction Kirsa indicated, up Terlath's rugged shoulder. Far above, the flayed skins of the two missing ewes hung upon separate boulders. "Breeterlik," Geva breathed, her gaze turning back to Kirsa. A snow-panther always carried its prey to its cavern intact, to savage it in private. A crag-charger scattered woolen tufts everywhere. Only the breeterlik fastidiously skinned its prey before devouring it.

In no other way was the breeterlik a fastidious beast.

Geva's shoulders bowed as she pulled her cape tighter. Her words

were hoarse, reluctant. "We have lost five ewes now."

"There are just thirty-three left," Kirsa agreed, trying not to let dread color the words. This was not the time to bow to fear. Once a breeterlik chose to plunder a herd, it did not relent until the herd was devoured, ewe by ewe, lamb by lamb. And Kirsa's family could not survive the next winter without cheese and wool.

Faced with a decision that was not properly a decision—when had a herder ever yielded to fear when the flock was threatened?—Kirsa narrowed her gaze toward the high crags again. Last summer Bina, Essian, and Pahl had climbed to defend their flocks, one by one; and afterward silver wings had flashed and gleamed high above the crags for all to see. But now the sky was empty, and Kirsa's gaze flicked reluctantly back to the pasture, to the remaining herd. "I must go up," she said, the words flat.

Geva's eyes held hers for a moment, then fell. "This is a cruel world," the old woman muttered.

"Harsh and cold," Kirsa responded ritually. "But there are wings waiting for us, wings of silver to carry us to eternity."

"And mammoth wings to carry us from this place entirely."

"Mammoth wings to deliver us," Kirsa said, completing the refrain. "If you see silver wings tomorrow, you will know I called upon the mountain power to destroy the killer. Then you must go back to the valley and fetch Bersh to look after the herd."

Suddenly tears trembled in Geva's faded eyes, liquid diamonds spilling onto withered cheeks. "If I see silver wings, daughter's daughter—if I see silver wings, I will celebrate their immortality and their summer's flight."

Kirsa's hands tightened. She turned away, wiping almost angrily at her own eyes, and ran to the cabin to fetch her mitts, her pack, and a single day's provisions. There was no question of remaining with the herd, not once she knew a breeterlik preyed upon the ewes and lambs. Her family had other daughters, three of them, and five sons as well. But there was only one herd, and the breeterlik would destroy that within a frighteningly short time if she did not intervene.

Silver wings, mammoth wings, she said soundlessly to herself, and let the mental image of spreading wings dampen her fear. *If I must call upon the power of the mountain to kill the breeterlik, silver wings will spread for me and carry me away from pain and hunger, away from death itself. Silver wings will carry me where they carried Bina and Pahl.*

But tears blurred her eyes and she could not stifle a concluding

thought: *They will carry me away from life and all I love.*

When she had thrown her pack across her back, she bobbed her head to her grandmother and ran back through the meadow to climb the rocks in the direction the breeterlik had taken.

The mountain welcomed her climbing feet, and within the first hour she found the skins of the other three ewes spread on the rocks, as she had expected. She touched the woolly hides with bared fingertips, offering the dead ewes her pledge: *I will see him dead, who took you from my fold.* Then she continued her climb.

Terlath's upper shoulders, when she climbed above the grass line, were riddled with caverns. Kirsa explored these cautiously. She found some no more than ten paces deep. Others disappeared into the mountainside, tortuous corridors bristling with mineral growths. She rejected a number of these as possible breeterlik dens when she found she could not enter them erect. The breeterlik would be taller than herself and would walk upright.

She paused at mid-morning to nibble cheese and bread, then continued her explorations. The sun was nearing zenith when she stopped finally before a broad-mouthed cavern high above the valley. Peering up at its dark mouth, she felt an instinctive response. Quickly she stripped off her mitts and reached down to slip off her boots. When her bare toes clutched the rocky soil, she closed her eyes and monitored the silent rush of energy that flowed underfoot. The mountain's power was alive in the rocks all around her, an enigmatic flow, constant, waiting. She could only sense it now; she could not draw from it. But in the moment of greatest crisis, it would become accessible to her and she would move in its silent strength.

Would she call upon it tonight? Was she prepared to make the sacrifice that came with the rush of that inaudible yet far-thundering power?

Would she have a choice? Because this, she somehow knew, was the cavern she sought. In its shadowy depths the breeterlik slept.

Quickly she pulled on her boots, dropped her mitts and pack into a shallow crevice in the rocks, and stepped into the cavern. Its rocky maw swallowed up light and sound, creating a sensory vacuum. Momentarily disoriented, Kirsa reached out for the reassuring touch of rock. Then she ventured forward, her pulse pattering furiously, drowning the tentative sound of her footsteps.

She had not gone far before she detected the first stench of carnivore. And before she had gone much farther, she heard a faint sound ahead. Pausing, she cocked her head. This time the sound

was more distinct: a grumbling snore. Fighting down the cold fear that turned her stomach to stone, Kirsa forced herself forward again. Her adversary would be sleeping soundly, his stomach filled with fresh ewe meat. She must take advantage of this opportunity to assess him.

She advanced until the musty fug of the breeterlik was thick in the air and she felt his body heat against her exposed face. She paused, drawing cautiously at the foul air of the cavern, then groped until her hands encountered coarse fur. Sucking a trembling breath, she reached out and touched a huge limb. She recognized it quickly for a hind leg. The carnivore stench was sickening now, and Kirsa's pulse beat a rapid tattoo.

But the animal did not stir. Feeling her way carefully, Kirsa followed the inert leg to the point where it joined the clawed foot. Stooping, she tried to encircle the massive ankle joint with both hands, but her fingers would not meet. The claws alone, she determined, were as long and as thick as her fingers.

Her hands trembling now, she traced the animal's backbone to its head, careful not to stumble, and groped for its ears. The ear flaps, an accurate index of size, were easily as long as her forearm. And they were not bald with age but heavily thatched. She sighed, her breath coming in a quiver. It was large even for its breed, a male breeterlik in its prime.

And this was the animal that was slaughtering the herd.

As Kirsa measured its ear flaps, the animal stirred, its breath grumbling in its throat. She backed away, repelled by the intensified stench of rotting flesh. She dared not waken the animal now. Her nails were not honed, and the beast instinctively slept with its legs drawn up to protect its one vulnerable spot, the puckered belly sphincter. But tonight, when moonlight washed the mountainside and hunger drove the breeterlik from its den again, it would walk upright, belly sphincter exposed.

Silently she slipped from the cavern and settled herself in a crevice in the rocks, her cape pulled around herself. The sun cast harsh rays against her fair skin while the mountain chill turned her face to marble. There was a great silence on Terlath's shoulder at midday. Had she not known that youths from the valley watched flocks on dozens of scattered spring meadows below, she would have felt herself the only living creature on the mountain.

Irresistibly her gaze was drawn to the peaks again, searching for the glint of silver wings. Tomorrow would she herself spread gleaming wings and soar the air currents? Would Geva return to the

valley to tell Kirsa's parents to look up, to see their daughter in her bright plumage, belonging no longer to the family but to the mountain?

Kirsa's lips quivered. How many times had she gazed up with awe and regret at the first soaring silver wings of summer? It was a bittersweet time in the valley when those first glinting wings were spied, when the people knew that one of their young herders had called upon the mountain power to destroy a ewe-killer and had accepted the transformation that accompanied the rush of power. The sense of loss was inevitable and undeniable.

Yet there was joy too. Life in the valley was harsh. The growing season was short, the harvest often scant. Dietarh deficiencies and grinding labor made the young old all too soon. Geva had lived barely forty winters; she would not live another. But a youth who took silver wings lived forever, one summer's season in corporeal form, an infinity more disembodied, caught up in the web of the mountain's power.

Infinity. And yet she hesitated at the thought of summoning the mountain power. Instead she considered pitting unenhanced human strength against a beast many times her size, risking a brutal and final death. Could she survive an encounter with the breeterlik without calling down the power?

At midafternoon she choked down dry bread and a scrap of cheese. Then she dozed. But bright wings danced against her eyelids, making her shiver, sometimes with dread, other times with anticipation. How would it feel to reach out for the air with surging wings? To swoop weightless circles around the highest crags? To peer down on the valley from a cloud-laced sky?

How would it feel to live forever, while in the valley generations were born and died? She knew, as did every inhabitant of the valley, that there were wings other than silver wings in their future. There were those shadowy promises called the mammoth wings. No one knew their dimensions and no one knew when they would come or how. But come they must. That belief stood at the very core of the valley faith. And when they came, they would deliver all living from this harsh, killing world.

Drawn into the web of mountain power, immortal, she would see that day. She would see the mammoth wings when they came, would see her people delivered to a life of health and plenty.

Torn, she passed the remainder of the afternoon in a troubled sleep. At last the sun set; and Nindra and Zan rose, shining with white brilliance. Stiffly Kirsa stood, pulled off her mitts, and gazed

at her bare hands. She had always envied her sisters their blunt, capable fingers, their sturdy hands. Now she was pleased that her fingers were long and slender. They would slip that much more easily into the breeterlik's belly sphincter. And although her fingers trembled, no weapon could serve her better against the leather-hided breeterlik.

Frowning, she took the file from her pack and honed her nails. Then she tossed off her cape and hid it in the crevice with her pack. Dressed only in long-sleeved tunic, leggings, and boots, she stationed herself near the cavern mouth to wait for the breeterlik to emerge.

The moons gazed down white-faced and silent, gilding the mountainside with unreality. At last Kirsa heard a hollow grumbling from the cavern. Stepping back involuntarily, she crouched in a tumble of rocks, tension tightening her calf muscles. The breeterlik's muttering commentary grew louder until finally the animal loomed in the shadows of the cavern mouth, twice as tall as Kirsa.

She shivered spasmodically as the beast shambled from the cavern, walking erect on two massive legs, carrying its forelegs low at its sides. Once it paused and peered around, its double-hinged lower jaw clacking, its deep-set eyes peering from shadowed brows. Beneath its untidy coat, Kirsa glimpsed the agitated writhing of its belly sphincter.

She froze, her breath clutching in her chest. Muttering and growling, the breeterlik passed her hiding place without seeing her. She quelled a quick surge of nausea at its foul odor, then forced herself erect.

Feeling brittle and unreal, Kirsa slipped silently after the animal. A short distance from the cavern, it stopped to slash its claws at a grooved boulder, then turned and scoured its back against a second, taller boulder. Occasionally a gout of digestive juice spurted from its agitated belly sphincter and runneled through the coarse hair of its abdomen. The corrosive fluid gleamed by moonlight.

Kirsa shivered, poised silently a short distance away. There were words every herder was taught before coming up the mountain, words to summon the mountain power, secret words to be uttered only in extremity. Now she rehearsed them under her breath, fervently, as the breeterlik continued up the mountainside to wet its mouth with unmelted snow.

Then, with a feeling of unreality, she darted after the animal. Catching up with it, she leapt past it, hardly aware of its initial indignant mutter, and ran on up the rough trail. At a safe distance

she halted and turned.

The animal peered at her, its coarse features caught in an expression of clownish surprise. Slowly its armed forelegs rose. Grimacing, the animal gathered itself into a hungry juggernaut. Its roar shuddered through the thin air.

Instinctively Kirsa answered its bellow with a taunting cry, then turned and ran again. The animal rumbled after her, totally alert now, voracious, corrosive fluid spraying from its belly sphincter.

The trail was steep, strewn with boulders. Soon Kirsa's breath burned in her chest. But it was to her advantage to tire the animal before confronting it. And so she continued to run, occasionally stumbling, almost falling. The animal complained after her, barely able to keep up despite its longer legs.

The trail narrowed to a rocky track bounded by a sheer drop on one side and a steep rock face on the other. Finally Kirsa realized that the breeterlik had fallen behind. She threw herself against the rough wall of the mountain, gasping for breath, her legs numb.

But this was not the time to rest. If the animal were exhausted, perhaps she would not need to call upon the mountain power. Instead she could slip down the trail and lunge while it labored for breath.

Her throat and lungs burning, her entire body trembling, Kirsa picked her way back down the trail. She heard the breeterlik's grunting exhalations before she saw the animal. It sprawled across the path gracelessly, its massive chest heaving. She paused, assessing it fearfully. Despite its obvious distress, its gaze was alert, even gloating.

Kirsa inched forward cautiously, not trusting the animal's apparent exhaustion, intensely aware of her own vulnerability. Even as she hesitated, hanging back against the rocky face of the mountain, the breeterlik's breath grew visibly less labored. Realizing that she was permitting her advantage to slip away, Kirsa drew herself erect and tautened her quivering muscles. Then she thrust out her arm and stepped forward jerkily, the sound of rushing blood an insect-whine in her ears.

With a triumphant grin, the breeterlik flowed to its feet, looming across the narrow trail. It bared its teeth in a gloating chortle and raked playfully at Kirsa.

Kirsa halted, swaying on the balls of her feet. For a frozen moment, as the claws drove at her, she stared into the eyes of death. Then, without intention, she spun away and was running up the trail again, mindless fear whipping at her heels. She ran without

conscious thought, ran like an animal driven.

She ran until she reached a rugged promontory high above the mountainside. And there the trail ended. To her left rose the sheer face of the mountain. Behind her lay the narrow trail. Before her and to her right, the mountain fell away steeply. Moonlight cast its merciless glow everywhere, sharply limning the bleakness of her alternatives.

Trapped, she spun, a spasm of fear wracking her. Like an apparition, the animal appeared behind her, its every labored exhalation a mocking chortle. Its shadow glided behind it, a silent accomplice. It pondered up the trail deliberately, confidently, relishing the final moments of the chase.

Kirsa was barely aware of the rush of her breath, of the pounding of her heart as the breeterlik shambled toward her. Its feet clattered on loose stone. It reared to its full height scarce meters from her, its stench overpowering.

Kirsa's mindlessly retreating feet carried her to the edge of the drop. Balancing there, she felt the impatient surge of the mountain's power, demanding to be invoked. And she admitted finally that she had no hope of killing the breeterlik with only her own slight strength. Had that ever been more than a futile hope?

Caught in a moment outside of time, Kirsa experienced a swift evolution of emotion: panic, reluctance, a first doubting hope, then hope stronger and sweeter, and finally elation. She would accept the power and the transformation. She would give up her human mortality for the glint of wings. She tossed back her head and threw out her arms, welcoming the flight of silver wings that soared into her awareness, buoying her upon their rustling pinions.

She was not alone with the breeterlik, and she was not weak. She was as strong as the rock underfoot, as strong as many-spired Terlath itself. She had been thrust up from the planet's interior millions of years before. She had survived ice and storm, had survived time itself, the ultimate eroder. No beast could destroy her with a slash of mortal paws for she was rock. Rock—and soon she would be wings. She laughed, feeling the mountain's power surge through her body.

Yet there was regret too. She would never return to the valley now, never tend her flock again or learn the skills of women. But silver wings waited to carry her against the air of eternity. Quickly she whispered the secret words and drew the flow of mountain power into her limbs. Barely aware of the rush of blood through her body, of the swift flow of adrenalin, she stepped toward the startled bree-

terlik, her arms still spread, her hair silver by moonlight.

Disconcerted at her advance, the breeterlik faltered and retreated a step. Its eyes glittered with misgiving. Prey did not advance upon the stalker; prey ran and cried and smelled of fear. That was the order of things. But now, for the first time in experience, that order was violated. This prey lunged forward and as it did so, it gave off an inexplicable odor, a disturbing odor, *the odor not of prey but of a predator*. The breeterlik's mocking chortle died. Shock and indecision paralyzed the animal.

Kirsa laughed at its discomfiture. With the power, it was so easy to be swift, to be courageous. "You are a dumb beast," she said. Then—before the animal could recover its composure—she extended her right hand and, shrieking, ran down the narrow trail. Her charge momentarily panicked the breeterlik. It took a second stumbling step back, then splayed itself against the rocky face of the mountain, its paws dangling uselessly.

And before it regained its wits, the breeterlik was dead. Kirsa's fingers thrust through the belly sphincter, slashed upward through the abdominal wall and snatched at the cluster of blood vessels that fed the beast's heart. Before it recovered from the paralyzing shock of her charge, she had severed three major arteries with her sharpened nails, pulled her hand free, and retreated down the trail.

She paused, half-crouched, at a safe distance, her hand warm with the breeterlik's blood. The wounded animal hunched around its violated abdomen, clutching itself, helpless to stem the massive internal hemorrhage. With a weak roar of anger, it tried to stagger after Kirsa. Instead its suddenly uncoordinated feet carried it to the edge of the trail.

It fell with a dying bellow. At the sound of impact, Kirsa ran to the edge of the trail. She could barely distinguish the breeterlik's body broken on the rocks far below. She hugged herself, suddenly cold. For moments she swayed at the brink of the drop. Then she stepped back, pressing herself against the rocky face of the mountain, still clutching her forearms with trembling fingers.

Fingers, not claws. With a sharply indrawn breath, she raised her hands before her eyes, the left one white and cold, the right one dark with blood. Quickly she glanced down at her slight body. She had called up the mountain power, she had slain the breeterlik, but no wings bristled from her shoulder blades, no silver feathers clothed her body. She was as she had been before: small, pale-haired, human. Peering uncomprehendingly at her arms, at her legs, she became aware of the harsh measure of her breath. *She had not changed*.

Was the mountain power toying with her, teasing her? But that was not the way of the power. That much she knew.

Clutching herself again, trembling, she turned and peered up Terlath's stone face. She waited thus for minutes, the breeterlik's blood cooling on her hand. Then, numbed, she turned and stumbled down the trail, expecting the transformation to catch her at any moment.

It did not. She walked down the mountain on human feet, trembling with human emotion.

She had covered half the distance to the breeterlik's cavern when she heard the irritable cry from the rocks above the trail, a hoarse-voiced warning echoed by half a dozen less militant voices. Startled, Kirsa halted, her breath drawn. The cry and its treble echo were repeated. Catching her lip between her teeth, she peered at the rocks, picking out a series of precarious footholds.

Somehow she knew before she climbed the rocks what she would find on the narrow ledge: a sparsely thatched nest cradled between boulders; an angry silver bird, its folded wings glinting by moonlight; and, peering from protection of the nest, six younger birds in various stages of development. One leapt from the nest to a nearby rock and spread its wings, repeating its parent's warning. Its wings were broad, almost fully developed. Within a few days the young silver wing would fly.

Within a few days it would soar above the mountain crags. And the people of the valley would look up and sadden, knowing that at least one of their young herders would not return at the end of the summer. Yet they would celebrate too.

Kirsa was trembling again, this time not with shock, not with fear, but with rising anger. It raged in her fiercely, warming her against the mountain cold. Clinging by one hand, she palmed a shard of broken eggshell that the silver wing had flung from her nest. Then she descended to the trail. The birds cried after her, echoing her bitterness.

She ran down the mountain, and it lay dead under her feet. The power that had surged from it only minutes before, a transforming force, was gone, turned to lies. The mountain that had been a living deity had become dust and stone, inert matter. She was alone, utterly alone, on a steep trail far from her valley home, far from her herd—far from the trust and belief of childhood. She was alone, and all creation had become ashes in her hand.

She reached the pasture hortly after daylight, the shard of eggshell still clutched in one hand. The ewes saw her before Geva did and trotted toward her, bleating jealously. She spoke to them sharply,

scattering them.

The first joy in Geva's face was quickly extinguished when Kirsa thrust the shard of eggshell at her. "I know now," Kirsa said harshly, before Geva could embrace her. "I killed the breeterlik, and I did not change. Then I found a silver wing nest, and now I know all the lies I have been told." All the lies with which she had been blinded. "I know the mountain has no power—it is all a tale. I know that silver wings hatch from eggs like any other bird. I know that they fly a summer and then return to the crags to nest instead of being incorporated into the mountain's web of power. Because there is no power. The mountain is dead. And I know that when Bina stalked the snow-panther last summer, she was not transformed to a silver wing. She was killed instead. Her bones are somewhere up the mountain, in the panther's den; and she is dead. *Dead.* And Essian and Pahl—"

As she spoke, Geva's face fell into lines of sadness. "They are gone, daughter's daughter. Dead too," she admitted.

The quiet of her voice momentarily stemmed the flow of Kirsa's anger. Blinking rapidly, Kirsa smoothed her forehead with a hand that trembled again. "And the year before, Leni and Dema—" she said less vehemently.

"They are lost. Gone. Dead," Geva acceded again. "And Jina and Tallen from my own youth, my brother Cam, my cousin Rafi—gone, all gone. Some of them killed their beasts and died of their wounds. Others were surely eaten, and still others must have died of exposure. No one will ever know how they all died."

Kirsa switched her head angrily. For a bare moment she had almost let herself be calmed. But the deception was too great, the loss unbearable. Now she rode the flame of her anger again. "But when they did die, you didn't tell us. You lied to us. You told us they were transformed. You told us they flew. That's how the adults of the valley protect their flocks. That's how they safeguard their cheese and woolen stocks. They lie to us, to their own children, and then send us up the mountain to die."

Briefly Geva's faded gaze wavered from Kirsa's accusing one. She picked at her cape with a rough hand. When she spoke, her voice was pitched low. "What can we tell you, daughter's daughter, when we all depend upon you? Upon our young herders? You are the ones with the energy to mind our capricious ewes and their lambs. You are the ones with the strength and reflexes to destroy the ewe-killers—the breeterlik, snow-panthers, and crag-chargers. And you are the ones who haven't yet the necessary skills to contribute fully in

the valley.

"What can we tell you when we know that one day, if we are all to survive, you may climb the mountain and face a beast many times your size? What can we tell your younger brothers and sisters? And what can we tell each other, when you fail to return?"

Kirsa groped angrily for some response. "Do you have to lie? Do you have to make fools of us?"

Geva shook her head. "But we do not, most of us. Not knowingly. Most of the adults of the valley fully believe the tale of the silver wings. So few of us ever see a silver wing at nest and live, you know. There are many in the valley who never learn that a silver wing hatches from an egg. They go through life seeing a symbol of sacrifice soaring above the mountain—and believing."

As Kirsa could never believe again. "But those of us who do see a silver wing nest—" she insisted, fighting to retain her anger, knowing that the pain that replaced it would be unbearable. "Those of us who know—"

"We never tell. Think, child. Think how your friends would die if you returned to the valley with this bit of eggshell and told where you found it. Dema, Leni, Essian, Pahl, Bina—I know how you loved Bina. You played together every day when you were children. She lives now, lives in the mountain power. If you tell what you saw, she will die a hundred times before the sun rises again. She will die in her mother's heart, die in her father's heart, die in her sister's heart, her brothers', her aunts' and uncles'. She will die—"

"No!"

"Yes, and Dema will die the same way, uselessly, die in all the hearts where she lives now, where she will live forever. And Leni and Pahl. And so many others.

"And think of the ones who have yet to face their beast. That moment's surge of belief is all many of them will have. It will save a few, as it did me, as it did you. It will give others the necessary strength to kill the beast as it kills them. And that is not so little, to die believing you will live."

It was not so little. When life had been reduced to bare moments, it could be everything. Admitting that, Kirsa let her head drop between her hunched shoulders, tears running freely down her cheeks. "I won't tell," she whispered, her anger finally quenched. The truth that lay behind the tale of the silver wings was not an ugly truth or a contrived truth after all. It was the truth of the human spirit, striving to survive upon a hostile world. Its tools were few: imagery, legend, hope, however kindled and re-kindled. "I won't

tell," she repeated. She could not kill those who had already died once. And she could not kill hope for those who must someday follow her up the mountain, comfort for their families.

Geva embraced her then, cradling her against her shoulder, smoothing her hair. "I knew you wouldn't tell. I knew you would never tell." She made a refrain of it, hypnotic, soothing.

But when her tears were dry, Kirsa found questions still lodged in her mind. "But I felt the power," she said, daring to look at the old woman. "I felt it drive me." How could that transforming rush of strength be a lie, when she had felt it in every taut muscle?

A smile lent Geva's weathered face a moment's youth. "The silver wings are a tale, oh yes. But the mountain power is not, Kirsa, not truly. The power is within us, a part of our very humanity. We deed it to the mountain and at the necessary moment the mountain gives it back to us. And if you feel the mountain is dead now—as I did once—be assured. It will live again, as soon as you deed it back its power."

"And the mammoth wings?" Kirsa asked then, her eyes intense, her breath held. Truth or lie? For the moment her need to know was greater than her fear of the answer. "The ones that will deliver us?"

"They will," Geva said quietly. "Wings brought us here, metal wings so large and powerful they are inconceivable to us now, so many generations after they failed and stranded us here. But there are other humans in the universe, and one day they will find us. One day they will deliver us. We will travel to worlds where the sun shines all winter and the ground thaws before late spring; worlds where we can walk with bare arms without contracting the killing-sores; worlds where we can live without constant hardship. The mammoth wings will come and deliver us."

Kirsa sighed deeply, believing her, accepting hope again. "Yes. Because this is a cruel world," she said, initiating the refrain she had learned as a child.

"Harsh and cold. But watch the mountains and one day you will see mammoth wings, great shadows in the sky. One day you will ride them."

"And if not me, my own," Kirsa responded. With a surge of reaffirmation, she took the shard of eggshell from her grandmother, broke it to bits, and tossed the bits across the meadow, joyously.

GIFT OF A USELESS MAN

by Alan Dean Foster

art: Karl B. Kofoed

Currently, the author lives in Big Bear Lake, CA, with his wife JoAnn (who was raised just forty miles from Robert E. Howard's home town of Cross Plains, TX). She is reputed to have the only extant recipe for Barbarian Cream Pie. They share a many-roomed home with three cats (Saturn, Mittens, & Orca), three dogs (Sasha, Petter, & Valentine) 200 house plants who assisted in the writing of Midworld, *assorted renegade coyotes and raccoons, and the ensorceled chair of the nefarious Dr. John Dee.*

Both Pearson and the ship were rotted out.

He hadn't known that when he'd rented it (having no intention of returning it and not worrying about that since both the credslip he'd used to pay for it and his corresponding identification were fakes), but he'd been in too much of a hurry to care.

The ship had made the Jump in one piece; but when he'd come out into normal space again, he'd found several small but critical components that had come out in many pieces.

All that was left of it now was a pillar of smoke and vaporized metal climbing into a pale blue sky. He could not bring himself to curse it. He knew the feeling. And it had ejected him, though somewhat less than safely. He was alive, and that wasn't much. All he felt now was an overwhelming tiredness, a fatigue of the spirit. A numbness of the soul.

Surprisingly, there was no pain. Inside, Pearson continued to function. Outside, he could move his eyes and lips, twitch his nose, and–with enormous effort–raise his right arm off the flat, sandy ground. His face was no longer merely a small part of an expressive self: it was all that remained. What the rest of his body, encased in the remnants of his flight suit, looked like, he could only imagine. He did not wish to imagine. He knew his right arm was intact because he could move it. Beyond that, all was morbid speculation.

If he was lucky, very lucky, he might be able to use the arm to turn himself onto his side. He did not bother to make the effort. There were no more illusions, at last no more illusions, circling languidly in Pearson's consciousness. On the eve of death, he had become a realist.

It was a tiny world he'd inflicted himself upon, no more than a very large asteroid, really. Silently, he apologized to it for any damage his crash might have caused. He was always apologizing for doing damage.

He was breathing, so the thin atmosphere was less tenuous than it looked. No one would find him here. Even the police who'd been chasing him would leave off searching. Pearson was a most insignificant criminal. Not even a criminal, really. To qualify for that label you had to do something modestly harmful. "Criminal" implied someone dangerous, threatening. Pearson was merely irritating to society, like a minor itch.

Well, he'd finally gone and scratched himself, he thought, and was surprised to discover he had the strength and ability left to laugh.

It made him black out, however.

When he regained his senses, it was just beginning to grow light. He had no idea how long this minuscule world's day was. Therefore he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. He might've been out a day or a week, human time. Though he no longer thought of himself as human. Complete muscular paralysis, save for his face and one arm, had left him a living corpse. He was unable to move about, nor reach the concentrates in the battered survival pack that might or might not still be attached to the leg of his suit, or do more than suck in the feeble atmosphere that was temporarily keeping him alive. He rather wished he'd blown up inside the ship.

He would not starve, however. He would die of thirst first. Living corpse, Pearson. Brain in a bottle. It gave him plenty of time to reflect on his life.

Actually, he'd been something of a living corpse all along. He'd never felt for anyone or anything, and not very strongly for himself. Never doing anyone any good and not having the capability to do anyone serious evil, he'd just sort of muddled along, taking up space and other people's air.

I'd have made a better tree, he mused tiredly. Pearson wondered if he'd have made a very good tree. Certainly he couldn't have been a worse tree than he had a man. He saw himself as a youth, cocky in a sniveling sort of way. Saw himself toadying up to the smoother, more professional criminals in hopes of worming his way into their company, their society, their friendship.

Naw, he hadn't even made a very good boot-licker. Nor could he go straight, the couple of times he'd tried. The real, legal world had regarded him with the same resigned contempt as the less virtuous. So he'd lived in a tenebrous, mucousy vacuum of his own invention, not quite functioning efficiently in the mental sense and only barely in the physical.

If only . . . but no, he stopped himself sharply. He was going to die. Might as well be honest for a change, if only with himself. The misfortunes he'd suffered were his own doing, always his own doing, not the fault of others as he'd forever been telling himself. There had been a few pitying ones who'd tried to help him. Somehow he always managed to screw things up. If nothing else, perhaps he could die being honest with his own thoughts.

He had heard that dying of thirst was not pleasant.

The sun went down, and no moon came up. Naturally not, for a world this small could not afford the luxury of a moon. It was a wonder it held onto a breathable atmosphere. Pearson wondered idly if there was life existing on the fine, flat soil around him. Plants,

maybe. He'd come down too fast and messily to spend time on such details. Since he was unable to turn his head, he could do no more than wonder.

Air rippled across him, a cool night breeze, pleasant after the mild, hazy heat of day. He felt it keenly on his face. The rest of his body's external receptors were dead. It was possible he'd suffered severe burns. If so, he couldn't react to them. In that respect the paralysis was a blessing. He knew that other parts of his body were functioning, though. He could smell himself.

When the sun rose again he was still wide awake. He estimated this world's day at three to four hours, followed by a night of equal duration. The information was of no practical use, but such speculation helped keep his mind busy. He was slowly adjusting to his situation. It's said the human mind can adjust to anything.

After a while he discovered the thought of death no longer bothered him. It would be a relief of sorts. No more running; from others, from his pitiful self. No one would grieve over him. No one would miss him. By his absence he would spare others the infection of his presence. The first hints of thirst, faint but unmistakable, took possession of his throat.

Short days passed and a few clouds appeared. He'd never paid any attention to clouds and little to the weather. Now he had time and reason to study both. He could see nothing else. It occurred to him he might be able to use his one functioning arm to turn his head and thus vary his line of sight. But when he tried, he found the arm would not respond sufficiently to carry out the complex maneuver.

Odd, the emotions. He discovered that the chance his one working limb might be becoming paralyzed frightened him more than the certain onslaught of death.

Clouds continued to gather above him. He regarded them indifferently. Rain might prolong his life a few earthly days, but eventually he'd starve. The concentrates in his suit pack could keep him alive for months, probably longer considering his lack of activity. But they might as well have been vaporized with the ship. He couldn't reach them.

His mind speculated on possible methods of suicide. If his arm would respond and there was a sharp piece of metal nearby, a scrap of ship, he might could cut his throat. If . . . if . . .

It did rain. Gently and steadily, for an entire half day. His open mouth caught enough to sate him. The clouds passed and shattered, and the distant sun returned. He felt it drying his face, assumed it was doing so to the rest of his body. He formed a new appreciation

for the miracle of rain and the process by which it's transformed into blood and lymph and cells. Amazing, astonishing accomplishment; and he'd spent a short lifetime taking it for granted. He deserved to die.

I am growing philosophical, he thought. Or delirious.

Short days gave way to brief nights. He had completely lost track of time when the first bug found him.

Pearson felt it long before he saw it. It crawled up his cheek. Maddeningly, he was unable to scratch at it or brush it away. It traversed his face, stopped, and peered into his right eye.

He blinked.

The tickle returned. He hadn't caught it, then. It was on his forehead now. After pausing there, it walked down across his left cheek, retracing its first approach. Out of the corner of his left eye he saw it as it dropped to his shoulder. It was blue-black and too small for him to discern individual details. It definitely looked like an insect.

It stopped on his shoulder, considering its surroundings.

Maybe it would be better this way, he thought. It would be faster if the bugs devoured him. When he'd bled enough, he would die. If they started below his head, he might never feel any pain before he passed out.

Silently, he encouraged the insect. Go on, buddy. Bring back your aunts and uncles and cousins and have yourselves a feast, courtesy of Pearson. It'll be a blessing.

"No, we cannot do that."

I'm delirious, he mused distantly, adding in reflex, "Why not?"

"You are a wonderment. We could not eat a wonderment. We are not deserving enough."

"I'm no wonder," he thought insistently. "I'm a wastrel, a failure, a thorough mistake of nature. Not only that," he concluded, "I am lying here conversing telepathically with a bug."

"I am Yirn, one of the People," the soft thought informed him. "I am not what a bug is. Tell me, wonderment, how can something so huge be alive?"

So Pearson told him. He told the bug his name, and about mankind, and about his sick, sad existence that was soon to come to an end, and about his paralysis.

"I am saddened for you," Yirn of the People finally said. "We can do nothing to help you. We are a poor tribe among many and are not permitted by the Laws to reproduce much. Nor do I begin to understand these strange things you tell me of space and time and

size. I find it hard enough to believe that this mountain you lie within once moved. Yet you say this is so, and I must believe."

Pearson had a sudden, disturbing thought. "Hey, look, Yirn. Don't get the idea I'm any sort of god or anything. I'm just bigger, that's all. I'm really less than you. I couldn't even make a good pimp."

"The concept does not translate." Yirn gave the impression of straining. "You are the most wonderful thing in all creation."

"Bullshit. Say . . . how can I 'talk' with you when you're so much smaller?"

"Among our People we have a saying that it is the size of the intellect that is important, not the size of the size."

"Yeah, I guess. Look, I'm sorry you've got such a poor tribe, Yirn; and I appreciate your being sorry for me. No one's ever been sorry for me before except me. Even a bug's sympathy's an improvement." He lay quietly for a while, regarding the bug, which preened minute antennae.

"I . . . I wish I could do something for you and your tribe," he finally said, "but I can't even help myself. I'm going to die of hunger soon."

"We would help if we could," came the thought. Pearson had a feeling of sadness all out of proportion to the creature's size. "But all we could gather would not feed you properly for a day."

"Yeah. There's food in my suit pack, but . . ." He fell silent. Then, "Yirn, tell me if there are shiny metal coverings on my lower body."

Moments passed while the insect made a hike to the promontory of a knuckle and returned. "There are what you describe, Pearson."

"How many People in your tribe?"

"What do you have in your mind, Pearson?"

Pearson told him and Yirn of the People replied. "Enough."

It took days, local days, for the tribe of Yirn to open the catches on the suit packs. When it became apparent the People could digest human food, a great mental rejoicing filled Pearson's brain; and he was glad.

It was a truly humble Yirn who later came to communicate with him. "For the first time in many, many generations, my tribe has enough to eat. We can multiply beyond the restrictions the Laws impose upon those bereft of food. One of the great blocks you call concentrates can feed the tribe for a long while. We have not tried the natural foods you say are contained in the greater pack beneath you, but we will.

"Now we can become a real tribe and not fear those tribes that prey on the poor. All because of you, great Pearson."

"Just 'Pearson,' you understand? You call me 'great' again and I'll . . ." He paused. "No, I won't do anything. Even if I could. I'm finished with threatening. Just plain Pearson, if you will. And I haven't done a goddamn thing for you. Your people got at the food all by themselves. First time I ever thought anything of concentrates."

"We have a surprise for you, Pearson."

Something was crawling with infinite slowness up his cheek. It had a little weight, more than the People. He saw it edge into his vision. A small brown block. Dozens of tiny blue-black forms surrounded it. He could hear their effort in his mind.

The block reached his lips and he opened them. Some of the People were terrified at the nearness of that bottomless dark chasm. They turned and fled. Yirn and other leaders of the tribe took their places.

The block passed over his lower lip. The People exerted a last, monumental effort. Some of them expired from it. The block fell into the chasm.

Pearson felt saliva flowing, but hesitated. "I don't know what good it'll do in the long run, Yirn, but . . . thanks. You'd better herd your folks off my face, though. There's going to be an earthqua . . . no, a Pearsonquake, in a moment."

When they were safely clear, he began to chew.

It rained the next morning. The raindrops were the size of raindrops on Earth. They posed a terrifying threat to the tribe, if they were caught out in the open. A few drops could kill someone the size of Yirn. But the entire tribe had plenty of shelter beneath the overhang of Pearson's right arm.

Many weeks later, Yirn sat on Pearson's nose, staring down into oceanic eyes. "The concentrates will not last forever, and the real foods we've found in your 'pack' beneath you will last less so."

"Never mind that. I don't want you to eat those. I think there's a couple of carrots, and on an old sandwich, there should be tomato slices, lettuce, and I think, mushrooms. Also pocya, a small kind of nut. The meat and bread you can eat, but save some of the bread. Maybe you can eat the mold."

"I do not understand, Pearson."

"How do you find food, Yirn? You're gatherers, aren't you?"

"That is so."

"Then I want you to take the carrots, and the tomato, and the others . . . I'll describe them to you . . . and also samples of every local plant your people eat."

"And do what with them, Pearson?"

"Gather the elders of the tribe. We'll start with the concept of irrigation. . . ."

Pearson was no agriculturist. But he knew, in his primitive way, that if you plant and water and weed, certain foods will grow. The People were fast learners. It was the concept of staying in one place and planting that was new to them.

A catch basin was dug, at the cost of hundreds of tiny lives. But the concentrates gave the People great energy. Tiny rivulets began to snake outward from the basin, away from the protective bulk of Pearson. When it ceased raining, the basin and the thread-thin canals were full, and the minute dams came into good use. Another basin was dug, and then another.

Some of the human food took and grew, and some of the local foods took and grew. The People prospered. Pearson explained the idea of building permanent structures. The People had never considered it because they could not imagine an artificial construct which would shed rain. Pearson told them about A-frames.

There came the day when the concentrates ran out. Pearson had been anticipating it, and was not dismayed by the news. He'd done far, far more than he'd dreamed of being able to do those first empty days alone on the sand, after the crash. He'd helped, and been rewarded with the first real friendship of his life.

"It doesn't matter, Yirn. I'm just glad I was able to be of some use to you and your people."

"Yirn is dead," said the bug. "I am Yurn, one of his offspring, given the honor of talking to you."

"Yirn's dead? It hadn't been that long . . . has it?" Pearson's sense of time was hazy. But then, the lifespan of the People was far shorter than man's. "No matter. At least the tribe has enough to eat now."

"It does matter, to us," replied Yurn. "Open your mouth, Pearson."

Something was crawling up his cheek. It moved at a fairly rapid pace. Tiny wooden pulleys helped it along, and over the pulleys were slung long cables made from Pearson's hair. A path for it was cut through his beard by dozens of the People using their sharp jaws.

It fell into his mouth. It was leafy and vaguely familiar. A piece of spinach.

"Eat, Pearson. The remnants of your ancient 'sandwich' have given birth. . . ."

Soon after the third harvest, a trio of elders visited Pearson. They sat carefully on the tip of his nose and regarded him somberly.

"The crops are not doing well," said one.

"Describe them to me." They did so, and he strained the hidden

places of his brain for long-unused schoolboy knowledge. "If they're getting enough water, then it can only be one thing, if they're all being affected. The soil here is getting worn out. You'll have to plant elsewhere."

"Many are the leagues between here and the farthest farm," one of the elders told him. "There have been raids. Other tribes are grown jealous of us. Our People are afraid to plant too far from you. Your presence gives them confidence."

"Then there's one other possiblity." He licked his lips. The People had found salt for him. "What have you been doing with the wastes from my body?"

"They have been steadily removed and buried, as you directed," said one, "and fresh earth and sand brought constantly to replace the region beneath you, where you dampen the ground."

"The soil here is growing tired," he told them. "It requires the addition of something we call fertilizer. Here is what the People must do. . . ."

Many years later, a new council came to visit Pearson. This was after the great battle. Several large, powerful tribes had combined to attack the People. They'd driven them back to the fortress mountain of Pearson. As the battle raged around him, the leaders of the three attacking tribes had led a forceful charge to take possession of the living god-mountain, as Pearson had come to be known to the other tribes.

Straining every remaining functional nerve in his body, Pearson had raised his one good arm and in one blow slain the leaders of the onslaught and all their general staff, and hundreds of others besides. Taking advantage of the confusion this engendered in the enemy's ranks, the People had counterattacked. The invaders were repulsed with heavy losses, and the land of the People was not troubled after that.

Many crops were destroyed. But with liberal doses of fertilizer supplied by Pearson, the next crop matured healthier than ever.

Now the new council sat in the place of honor atop Pearson's nose and gazed into fathomless, immense eyes. Yeen, eighth son-in-line from Yirn the Legendary, held the center.

"We have a present for you, Pearson. You had told us months ago of an event you call a 'birthday,' and rambled much about its meaning and the customs that surround it. We cast our thoughts for a suitable gift."

"I'm afraid I can't open it if it's wrapped," he quipped weakly. "You'll have to show me. I wish I could offer you one in return.

You've kept me alive."

"You have given us much more than life. Look to your left, Pearson."

He moved his eyes. A creaking, grinding noise began, continued as he watched empty sky and waited. The feeling-thoughts of thousands of the People reached him.

An object slowly rose into view. It was a circle, set atop a perfect girderwork of tiny wooden beams. It was old and scratched in places, but still shiny: a hand mirror, gleaned from God knew what section of his backpack or suit pockets. It was inclined at an angle across his chest, and down.

For the first time in many years he could see the ground. Before he could express his thanks for the wonderful, incredible gift of the mounted old mirror his thoughts were blanked by what he could see.

Tiny rows of cultivated fields stretched to the horizon. Clusters of small houses dotted the fields, many gathered together into semblances of towns. A suspension bridge made of his hair and threads from his suit crossed a tiny stream in three places. On the other side of the People-sized river were the beginnings of a small city.

The mirror crew, through an ingenious system of pulleys and cords, turned the reflector. Nearby was the factory where, he was told, wooden beams and articles were manufactured from local plants. Among the tools used to shape the beams were sharp bits of Pearson's fingernails. Huge tents housed other factories, tents made from the treated skin which peeled regularly off Pearson's suntanned body. Tools moved smoothly, and pulleys and wheels carried people to and from, lubricated in part with wax taken from Pearson's ears.

"Offer us something in return, Pearson?" said Yeen rhetorically. "You have given us the greatest gift of all: yourself. Every day we find new uses for the information you give us. Every day we find new uses for what you produce.

"Other tribes that once we fought with have joined with us, so that all may benefit from you. We are becoming what you once called a nation."

"Watch . . . watch out," Pearson mumbled mentally, overcome by Yeen's words and the sweeping vistas provided by the mirror. "A nation means the onset of politicians."

"What is that?" asked one of the council suddenly, pointing downward.

"A new gift," came his neighbor's thought, also staring down the

great slope of Pearson's nose. "What is it good for, Pearson?"

"Nothin'. I learned a long time ago, friends," he said, "that tears ain't good for nothing. . . ."

Yusec, hundred and twelfth son-in-line from Yirn the Legendary, was resting on Pearson's chest, enjoying the shade provided by the forest of hair there. Pearson had just finished a bit of a wonderful new fruit the People had grown on a far farm and brought in especially for him. Pearson could see Yusec via one of the many mirrors mounted around his face, all inclined to offer him a different view of his surroundings.

A party of young were touring his pelvic region and another was making its way around the base of his ear. Others came and went from him on crude escalators or one of the many huge stairways that mounted him on all sides. Groups of archivists stood nearby, ready to record any stray thought Pearson might produce. They even monitored his dreams.

"Yusec, the new food was very good."

"The farmers of that region will be pleased."

There was a pause before Pearson spoke again. "Yusec, I'm dying."

Startled, the insect rose to his feet, stared up at the massif of Pearson's chin. "What is this? Pearson cannot die."

"Bullshit, Yusec. What color is my hair?"

"White, Pearson. It has been so for many decades."

"Are the canyons of my face deep?"

"Yes, but no deeper than in my great-grandfather's time."

"Then they were deep then. I am dying, Yusec. I don't know how old I am because I long ago lost track of my time, and I never troubled to compare it to your time. It never mattered. It still doesn't. But I am dying.

"I'll die happier than I once thought I would, though. I've done more moving since I've been paralyzed than I did when I was mobile. I feel good about that."

"You cannot die, Pearson." Yusec repeated his insistence while sending out an emergency call for the hospital team set up many years ago solely to serve Pearson's needs.

"I can and will and am," came the reply, and a frightened Yusec heard the death coming over Pearson's thoughts like a shadow. He could not imagine a time without Pearson. "The hospital people are good. They've learned a lot about me on their own. But there's nothin' they can do. I'm gonna die."

"But . . . what shall we do without you?"

"Everything you do is done without me, Yusec. I've only given you advice, but the People have done all the actual work. You won't miss me."

"We will miss you, Pearson." Yusec was resigning himself to the massive inevitability of Pearson's passing. "I am saddened."

"Yeah, me too. Funny, I was almost coming to enjoy this life. Oh well." His thoughts were very weak now, receding like the sun around the world.

"Just a last idea, Yusec."

"Yes, Pearson?"

"I thought you'd use my body, the skin and bones and organs, after I'd gone. But you've gone beyond that. Those last bronzes you showed me were real good. You don't need the Pearson factory anymore. Silly idea, but . . ."

Yusec barely caught the last Pearson thought before his presence left the People forever. . ."

"They're people, sir! I know they're no bigger than an eyelash, but they've got roads and farms and factories and schools and I don't know what else. Our first non-human intelligent race, sir!"

"Easy, Hanforth," said the Captain. "I can see that." He was standing outside the lander. They'd set down in a large lake to avoid smashing the intricate metropolis which appeared to cover the entire planetoid. "Incredible's the word for it. Anything on that wreck site?"

"No sir. It's ancient. Hundreds of years at least. Detectors found only fragments of the original ship.

"The native delegation, sir?"

"Yeah?"

"They have something they want us to see. They say some of their major roadways are wide enough for us to travel safely, and they've cleared all traffic."

"I guess we'd better be courteous, though I'd feel safer doing our studies from out here, where we can't hurt anybody."

They walked for several hours. Gradually they reached an area near the site of the crater produced by the impact of an archaic ship. They'd seen the object rise over the sharp horizon, believed in it less as they drew nearer.

Now they stood at its base. It was a metal spire that towered fifty meters into the watery blue sky, tapering to a distant, sharp point.

"I can guess why they wanted us to see this." The Captain was incredulous. "If they wanted to impress us, they've done so. A piece

of engineering like this, for people of their size . . . it's beyond belief." He frowned, shrugged.

"What is it, sir?" Hanforth's head was back as he stared toward the crest of the impossible spire.

"Funny . . . it reminds me of something I've seen before."

"What's that, sir?"

"A grave marker. . . ."

Letters to the Editor should be addressed to the magazine at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101. (The address for subscription matters is entirely different: Box 1855 GPO, New York NY 10001. Other matters concerning the magazine, such as advertising, newsstand circulation, and the like should be sent to the department concerned at Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York NY 10017.)

Editorial matters—including requests for our editorial needs and manuscript format—should be sent to the magazine at the Philadelphia address, as above.

Want to help run a science fiction magazine? Then write us and tell us what we're doing right, what we're doing wrong, what we should be doing that we're not, and what we're omitting that we should include.

Help with distributing the magazine is, if anything, even more important: let us know how well the magazine is being displayed on newsstands in your area.

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I have been reading *IA'sfm* for several months now and I find it truly great. The two current issues are among the best.

In the February '79 edition my favorite story was "Proud Rider" by Barry B. Longyear. I have thoroughly enjoyed his Momus series and I hope he keeps writing them forever. I also liked "To Fill the Sea and Air" by Wilson. It was heartwarming. Asimov's "Nothing for Nothing" was fantastically delightful, and I will always enjoy rereading it. Another favorite was Larry Niven's "In the Cellar." I have never read much Niven (the only other Niven story I've read being *The Mote in God's Eye*) but I intend to change that. This tale also explains why James Bond never seems to get hurt.

And this month (Boy! I can hardly believe it!) there is actually a Martin Gardner puzzle that I can solve! However, to counter that wonderous event you publish Smith's "On Kepler, Newton, and Company." I am not all that good at math or science and so the article left me way behind after the first few pages. Thus I just skipped the rest and went on with the other stories.

This month's booby prize should go to "Up-top Summer," followed in a close second by "Fit the Crime." The first was just nonsense. I mean, what was the point to it? As to the second, it was just not

understandable. I did not get the ending.

Concerning the March issue, it was not as good as the previous, yet I enjoyed it nonetheless.

"A Time for Terror" was very good and showed some of the evils of terrorism while at the same time giving us a dose of corrupt government. The ending, though cruel, was well deserved.

Longyear's "Dueling Clowns" was delightful, although it took me a couple of minutes to get the ending. "Ahead of the Joneses" was wonderful! Possibly the funniest story I have ever read. "Djinn & Duckworth," "Simulacrum," and "Tank" were pretty good, but not too much so, and I'm sure to get some angry comments for my opinions. "The Secret" was okay but still I did not fully and easily understand the finale. (Why so many stories with confusing endings lately? Is it just me and my ignorant brain?) What could slush piles hope to do for a man's presidential candidacy?

I also enjoyed reading the second part to James Gunn's article "On the Road to Science Fiction."

"Someone Else's House" by Lee Chisholm was very good and fun to read. I liked the way the victim turned the tables on her kidnappers. However, this story didn't seem like science fiction to me. It was too mainstream.

Now to comment on Frederik Pohl's "Mars Masked" (a strange title, as there was no mention of Mars in the story). I found the story to be extremely blasphemous. Being a devout Southern Baptist it was very distressing to read certain parts of it. I mean, the hero was supposed to be a *minister!* If he had been a regular person it wouldn't have bothered me, but a minister! The hero readily admitted to being a fornicator, he married four people to each other: two men and two women to each and every other! (if it had been one man and three women it would've been okay as I see nothing wrong with having more than one wife), and he also prepared a wedding ceremony for two men named Arthur and James! Now Pohl is a very good and very famous writer and this is not meant as a personal criticism of him, nor his story, as it is very possible that the future may well be like "Mars Masked" says. Yet it was just a bit too much blasphemy. Yet overlooking these things (a difficult task, let me tell you!) the tale was pretty good.

Well, that is my opinion on the current issues of *IA'sfm,* and I hope they will be well taken and do not insult anybody.

Thank You,

Steven B. Cowan
2410 McInnis Lp. #51
Hattiesburg MS 39401

Well, I didn't mean to cause distress! But as far as Horny Hake's ministerial duties were concerned, I didn't make much up, either—they represent not fanciful future possibilities but a sort of composite of actual happenings from the lives of four or five ministers I know. (Admittedly none was a Southern Baptist!)

Perhaps this is a good place for me to mention that I have a doctorate in divinity? (Ahem.) To be sure, it's an honorary *degree. My family gave it to me for my birthday a couple of years ago. It cost $25.*

—Frederik Pohl D.D. (Hon.)

Dear Mr. Scithers;

Congratulations on getting Ms. Kress's "Against A Crooked Stile" for your May issue.

I was beginning to think of *IA'sfm* as the *Reader's Digest* of the science fiction magazines, and it's nice to see a story that is evocative as well as cleanly written.

(And the use of the italicized phrases for internal flashbacks was well executed and effective.)

Although I am a confirmed admirer of H. H. Munro, O. Henry, and Dorothy Parker, I also hold that fiction can be good, understandable and entertaining even when it's not a first person narrative or omniscient narrative type.

Now, I realize that stories like Joyce's *Dubliners* collection don't cross your desk every day of the week, but I wish you the best and encourage you to continue to solicit fiction that is both comprehensible and engrossing.

It *is* possible to find prose and characterization that are as gripping in their own right as are the unusual science fiction concepts.

Thank you,

John P Warlo
2745 Clayton St
Philadelphia PA 19152

I take it the reference to Reader's Digest *is meant to hurt our feelings. Well, well, it does frustrate us that we haven't got* RD's *circulation.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George,

Come now, tell us: how do you do it? How *do* you and your staff

manage to handle the "deluge" of MSS. that cross your desks "every day"?

Do you read *every* MS.? What does Isaac do? Is *he* as active or more active than you when editing your great magazine?

Tell us, enlighten your loyal readers. Perhaps we'll be more kind to you when corresponding and submitting our work as a result.

Truly,

Andrew Andrews

Read my editorials faithfully. All our family secrets will come out sooner or later. I'm such a blabbermouth.

—Isaac Asimov

The way we handle the deluge of MSS. is by being plural: the magazine's masthead lists Shawna McCarthy, Associate Editor; and Meg Phillips, Darrell Schweitzer, Lee Weinstein, and Alan Lankin, Assistant Editors. With George Scithers, that makes six people available to read the deluge.

Actually, it's possible for Scithers to read everything that comes in every day—but that leaves no time for writing rejections, filling out purchase contracts, assigning artwork, and encouraging writers to send in more material. And, to be candid about it, if a story starts out with a boring couple of pages, ends with a boring page, and looks no more interesting in the middle, then it just doesn't take very long to decide that no one who paid for a copy of the magazine will enjoy that story. Similarly, it just doesn't take very long to spot a routine UFO story or a routine Time Machine story (H. G. Wells wrote about these topics back in the 1890s!), or a pointless futility (everybody gets run over by a truck in the last page), or one in which the "science" came out of the comic books and the characters out of Central Casting. What really takes the time is the almost-good-enough stories, where the six of us (with occasional help from Isaac when Scithers asks for it) try to figure out how to tell the author what needs be done to fix the story.

So: on some days, Scithers reads everything that comes in. Usually, he reads some of what comes in, plus all those that someone else on the staff thought deserved a second look.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I originally subscribed to *IA'sfm* as a humanitarian gesture: Our

local intermediate grade school was selling magazine subscriptions door-to-door to help pay for new band uniforms, or some such worthy cause. My husband couldn't resist the sweet smile of a blonde, blue-eyed 14-year-old, nor could he find a magazine on her list that he wanted. (He is *not* a sci-fi [SF, please! GHS] fan. On that point we have agreed to disagree. I love sci-fi). He did see your magazine listed and asked me if I wanted to subscribe. I absent-mindedly assented and, mildly suspicious of nubile blondes, wondered if I would receive the magazine. Of course, I did (shame on my untrusting nature); and I have thoroughly enjoyed every copy, so much so that recently I resubscribed by a more direct method.

One thing which excited me about your publication was the number of new authors you include. The stories are of excellent quality, proving newcomers to be as potentially talented as those more experienced (published? paid?) in the field. I want to place one of my stories in the line-up for your consideration, but I want it to be dressed right for the interview. Please send me a copy of your manuscript requirements and story needs. [*Done! GHS*] I enclose the required return envelope.

Margaret Hays
Willows CA

I, on the other hand, tend to think highly of nubile blondes.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

A few comments on your June 1979 issue, which, incidently, I found superb. "The Thaw" by Tanith Lee, had just the right amount of the macabre, that had it been played just a bit differently, it might have been a classic.

Unfortunately, the authoress, almost as an afterthought added a pinch of aliens at the end. Over-spiced, overspiced! Why did she ruin a perfectly good story? Have those long dead bug-eyed monsters risen from their cryogenic suspension to haunt us again? Wouldn't it have been an incredible tour de-force if the story had been written *sans* aliens? Just imagine—humans are placed in cryogenic suspension after death, and, upon awakening, are found to have lost their souls. What's left is an evil, cannibalistic parody of a human being. The story might have made some social comment (not unknown in science fiction). Instead, its just a well-written story with a slight variation on the pat alien-possession theme. Oh well. . . .

Jon Breen's piece "On Science Fiction Detective Stories" was excellent. I was, however, disappointed to see that *The Demolished Man*, by Alfred Bester, was not mentioned as a classic of the science-fiction/detective genre. Other than the good Doctor (of course), I consider Bester one of the two best science fiction authors of this century. In fact, his classic, *The Stars My Destination*, is, in my humble opinion, the best science fiction work ever written.

In any event, I thoroughly enjoy your magazine. Keep up the good work!

Very truly yours,

Wayne L. Benjamin
Menands NY

If you think a story is imperfect, consider it a challenge. Do better, and let us see it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers,

I've seen your magazine on the stands for several months now, but the May 1979 issue is the first one that I've bought. That was yesterday afternoon; since then I've read approximately half of it, and I must say that I'm impressed with the style of the magazine and the quality of the stories.

One thing in the way of criticism, though, and I hope that you accept it in the spirit in which it is offered; the covers of the magazine tend to be too flashy. I'm reminded of a review by Spider Robinson that I once read, of some early Heinlein "space operas," that were being reprinted in a juvenile series. He said that the books were great reading, and anyone that hadn't read them should do so, but to keep them in a brown paper bag, because if anyone saw you with them, you would be embarrassed (referring to the covers). I haven't gone to that extreme with your magazine, but the point is the same.

Also, I request that you send to me a list of editorial requirements for story submissions. I've enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope. [*Done! Naturally, we'd far rather tell you our format for manuscripts and our requirements BEFORE you write your story than afterwards, because doing it before saves both you and us much time and trouble. GHS*]

Sincerely,

W. David Todd
Lexington KY

When I started reading SF a half-century ago, there were much the same arguments about covers. It may be an insoluble problem.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

What I would really like to see in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine is a yearly index beginning this December. The first index could cover all issues to date, and from then on indexes would cover one year only. It is far easier to look up a story in an index than to page through six or eight magazines. An index similar to the one in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* would be sufficient, but once a year would be better than twice a year as in *F&SF*. I am sure many readers would agree that an index would be very useful.

Sincerely,

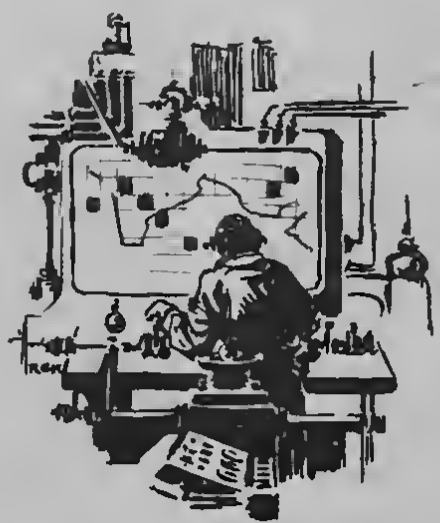
Terry Kroemer
Jacksonville FL

Good idea; and if George finds no practical reasons against it, I suggest it be adopted. How about it, George?

—Isaac Asimov

Okay: I plan then to put an index for our first three years of the magazine, from the Spring 1977 through the December 1979 issues, in the January 1980 issue.

—George H. Scithers



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